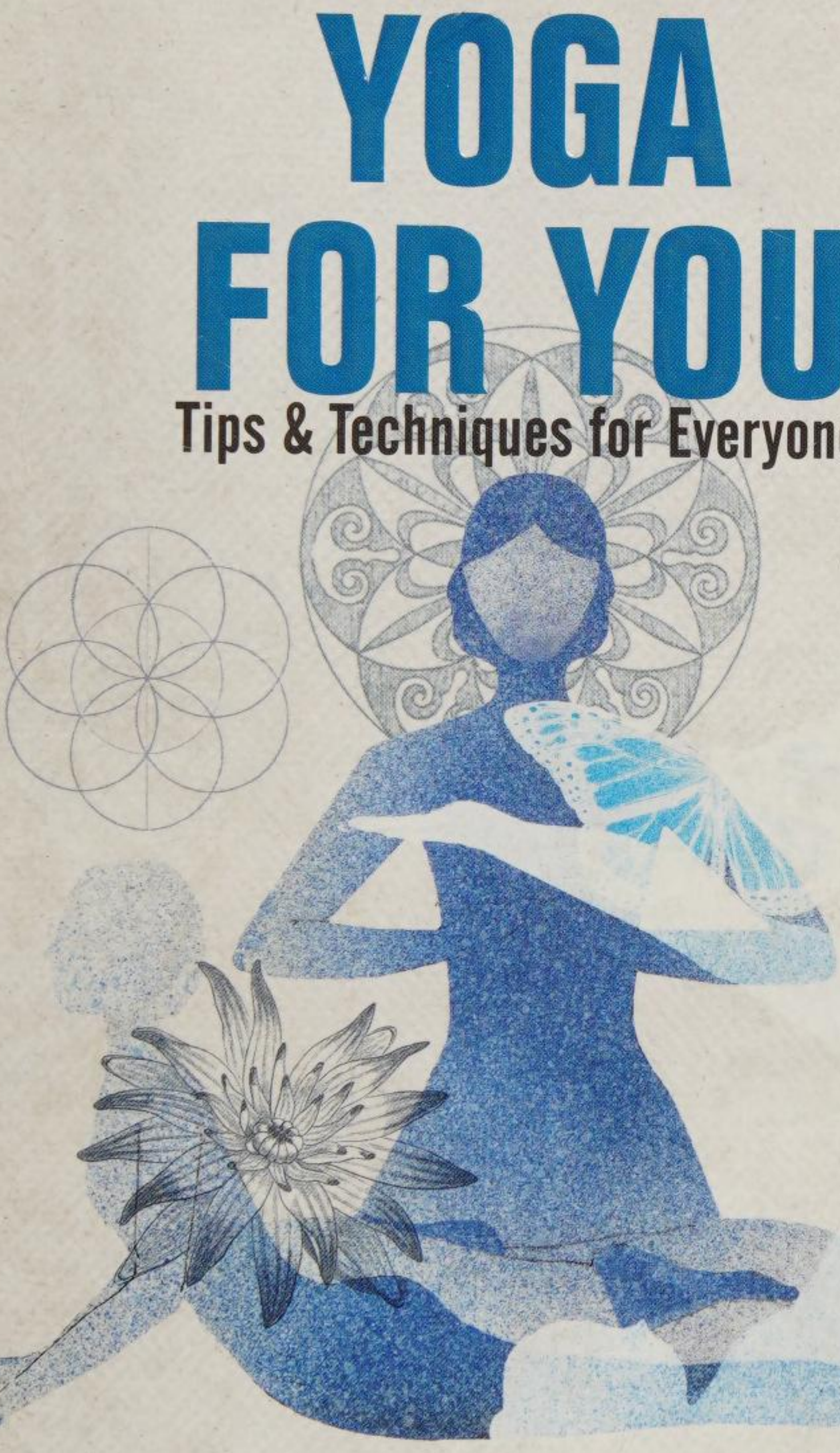
YOGA FOR YOU

Tips & Techniques for Everyone



Prahlada Reddy
& Shameem Akthar

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YOGA FOR YOU:

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR EVERYONE

By

Prahlada Reddy
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Prahlada:
This book is dedicated to my own guru, Swami Vishnudevananda, the founder of the Sivananda school of yoga, who is the source of all the knowledge and experience we have acquired.

I remember also, with gratitude, every student. And each assistant teacher who has selflessly volunteered to help us over the years. It is the combined effort of these individuals that has made yoga accessible to the world.

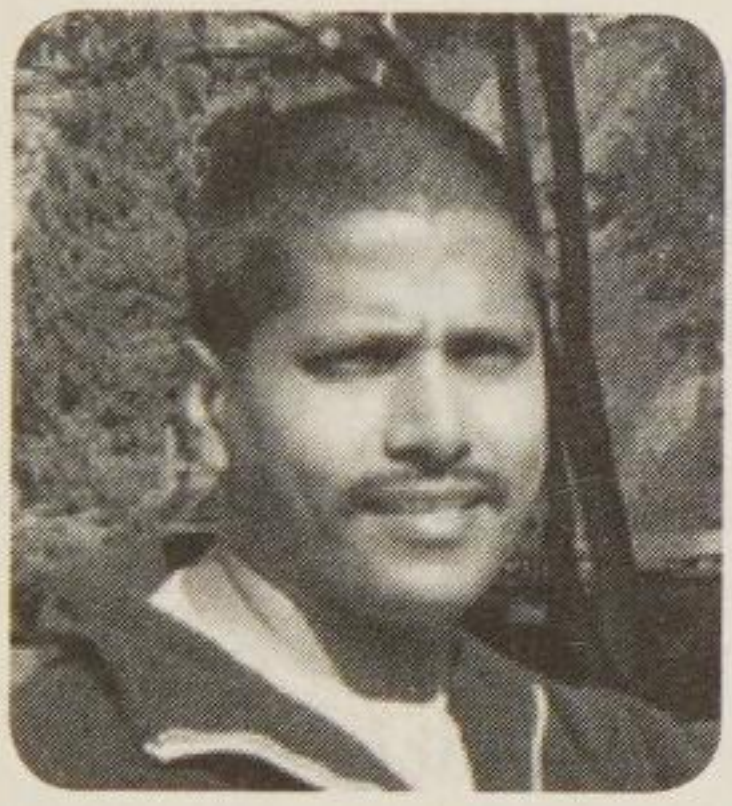
A special mention must be made of the co-author's husband, Saisuresh Sivaswamy, and daughter, Jahnavi Sheriff, who patiently allowed her to work on this book.

Shameem:
My source of inspiration as a teacher will always be my asana guru, Prahlada. To see him conduct a large class, even if it has over 250 students, connect with each one, and lift their performance up beyond their own expectations, is in itself a powerful lesson in giving, sharing and teaching.

This book is dedicated to my Sadguru Swami Sivananda and Sriguru Swami Vishnudevananda; I feel constantly connected to both, and remember them in every class I hold.

Each of my students has taught me how I can improve myself as a teacher. My husband and my daughter, through their own love for yoga, have patiently given me the space to grow.

FOREWORD



I started teaching when I was 17 years of age. My initial difficulty while teaching was with language, a difficulty that is not common to most instructors. But I have improved along the way.

Each instructor has a core belief – mine is strung around patience, understanding and, of course, extreme discipline. My core belief has been that your Sadguru (in this case it is Swami Sivananda) is there to take care of you while you teach and practise. Trust him, and put your heart into trying to help people who attend your classes.

A good instructor is one who understands the weaknesses of difficult students – is aware of their ego and is accommodative. He must always sustain the feeling that he is only an instrument and is there to try to help those who challenge him.

An instructor is not someone who knows it all – I believe by teaching you learn; this has been the motto of my life. I am convinced that my Guru led me into teaching yoga so as to help me see myself in my students, and grow with them.

Yes, instructors sometimes complain they have difficult days. But I have never identified with the title of a teacher. So there have never been emotional hurdles or blocks to my entering a class. Also, it is very important to maintain your own personal practice. You are only what you teach. And you teach only what you practise.

From years of teaching, I feel strongly that what people need is a form of instruction that relies on the scriptures, and comes with integrity of purpose. I believe this book draws out the purity of teaching and practising.

Also, it will help fine-tune yoga instruction. It is very important to take students from where they are physically, then guide them through corrections and work on their posture, so they acquire greater depth in pose. It's important, though, to train in such a way that students do not become dependent on the instructor. I believe this book recognizes this, and takes yoga instruction, including self-learning, to that special level where a pose becomes a tool for meditation.

My main belief has been to retain a purity of practice. Follow one teacher and one Guru. Try not mix your teachings with your personal input. You can never be a teacher without surrendering. Or a practitioner without making your practice an offering to a higher grace.

– Prahlada Reddy

I see myself as a practitioner rather than an instructor. Every class is a meditative experience for me, and in every student I see my own aspirations on the mat. This book, which I am compiling using my asana guru Prahlada's words and teachings, is an offering to all my teachers and all my students. This book also sums up why and how practice and teaching have been two sides of the same coin for me.

– Shameem Akthar

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SECTION 1

SOME TIPS ON HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

VERBAL FEED

- Instructors may use the cues given in the chapters as actual instructions – to design the class or teach a pose. Fine corrections may be introduced later, as the students get used to basic instructions.
- The section labelled 'Fine Corrections' may be used by instructors to provide steady verbal feed in a class. It promises to engage the mind and keep the student involved with the pose and body. The book explains this in greater detail in the first chapter, 'Supta padangushtasana'.
- Mentioning the benefits as the pose is being held and when the duration is extended is a good way of ensuring that the students focus on the asana. The process then becomes deeply meditative and healing. The same rule applies for those using this book for personal growth – remembering the benefits helps the student hold the pose for a longer duration, with the attention constantly fixed within the body.

BREATHING CUES

- Cues for breathing must be continually given. Several students think the call to inhale and exhale means they must hold the breath between either. Unless it is explained

that normal breathing must continue between breath cues, many newcomers will strain to hold their breath. This is also true for those who practise on their own – when people focus on something intensely they are conditioned to hold their breath. Strained breathing or retention however could mean that they are over-extending themselves. It could actually exhaust them and create stressful conditions for the body and mind.

- There are different ideas and traditions revolving around breathing cues. While many instructors are tempted to forgo this aspect of cue-giving, breathing guidelines form a core component of any good yoga class. Classically, raising a body part usually involves an intake of breath, and lowering it involves breath being expelled. Similarly, whenever two parts of a body come close, exhaling is recommended. This is because, once the lungs are emptied, there's space for a twist. Also, exhale for any difficult move in a pose, since the body is said to relax when we breathe out. For the rest of the duration, one needs to pay constant attention to normal breathing, and instructors need to keep this in mind while giving instructions.
- For those who are not instructors but are using this book as a self-instructional manual, the corrections will definitely help in perfecting personal practice. While going through the section labelled 'Instructor's Role', remember, you are playing your own instructor, so the cue words and corrections are what you need on the mat yourself. Alternatively, you may involve a practicing partner to play the role of a guide or instructor.

CORRECTIVE TECHNIQUES

- If you are an instructor, when physically correcting a student's posture or asana, always ensure that you have sought her permission. If the student is unaware of your presence or your touch, it may shock her, especially if her

eyes are closed or she is meditating. This rule is particularly pertinent if the student is of the opposite gender. In certain cultures touching certain parts of the body by those of the opposite sex may be deeply offensive. Be alert to these cultural inhibitions before extending a physical correction.

- It is important to bear in mind that not all students are open to corrections. Some students may resent adjustments to pose or posture when they are tired or when they feel they are not ready. An instructor must be finely clued into such cues from students before extending assistance.
- Corrective movements or touch must always be gentle. Yanking the student's body forcefully will be counterproductive, especially since the student may contract muscles subconsciously to resist such correction. This may cause short-term injury, which will block the student's progress and create unpleasantness. Any corrective movement must inspire trust and co-operation.

POSES

- The book covers classical, intermediary and rest poses, highlighting both the English and the Sanskrit names. Some other poses that are known to students are merely mentioned, not covered in depth.
- The book clearly indicates the stage a student should have reached for certain corrections. While some corrections are for students displaying flexibility or strength in pose, some are for rank beginners. An instructor must gauge the student's ability on the mat to arrive at a decision. This kind of assessment also applies to those hoping to boost their personal performance on the mat with this book.
- There are thousands of self-instruction manuals. In this book we have tried to be different, keeping what is already known about the classical poses compact. Instead, the book has dealt with corrections at length; these are corrections which are neglected both by manuals as well by most yoga classes.

If you are a student or a practitioner, this book offers a unique perspective on practice; it is as if you are being gifted with a personal trainer who anticipates all your fears, discomforts and physical inhibitions. If you are an instructor, this book highlights the issues you want to deal with while teaching. It does not offer pat instructions; rather, it is an intuitive guidebook drawing from several years of teaching experience. It is a form of sharing.

PLEASE NOTE

The use of feminine pronouns in this book may be construed to mean both male and female, unless specifically stated otherwise.

SECTION II

ASANAS, PRANAYAMA & SURYA NAMASKAR

Asanas and pranayama are the third and fourth limbs in the eight limbs that comprise yoga. They follow yamas and niyamas which relate to personal code, conduct and behaviour. Asana practice suggests doing poses that engage the body. It may be a hyperbole, but it is believed that there are 84 lakh asanas in yoga! Perhaps the exaggeration is meant to convey the expanse of this subject and the fact that one can remain a student forever!

Pranayama describes yogic breathing practices. Pranayama and asanas complement each other. Asanas prepare the body for the energy that is being yoked through sadhana or regular practice, while pranayama channelises this energy. Asana sessions will prepare you for the difficult aspects of pranayama such as retention and exhalation. Similarly, pranayama sessions will help you heal faster in case of injuries, and reach extreme or difficult poses by giving breath support to the muscles at work.

Both lead you into the higher limbs of yoga, those that involve the mind, such as sense withdrawal (pratyahara), focus (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and cosmic consciousness (samadhi). Though both asanas and pranayama are seen as preparatory practices that lead one into meditation, when done with focus and regularity they can become complete meditative experiences in themselves.

CHAPTER 1:
MAIN ASANAS

SUPTA PADANGUSHTASANA
(LYING BIG TOE POSE)

For beginners of yoga, this pose may initially appear 'easy', leading to the temptation to 'finish it off' quickly and move on to the more 'exotic' poses. However, in order to experience yoga as a meditative practice and enhance one's ability to meet its intense physical challenge, this pose is the starting point. As the participant fine-tunes it and raises the bar by increasing the duration, it becomes unbelievably challenging.

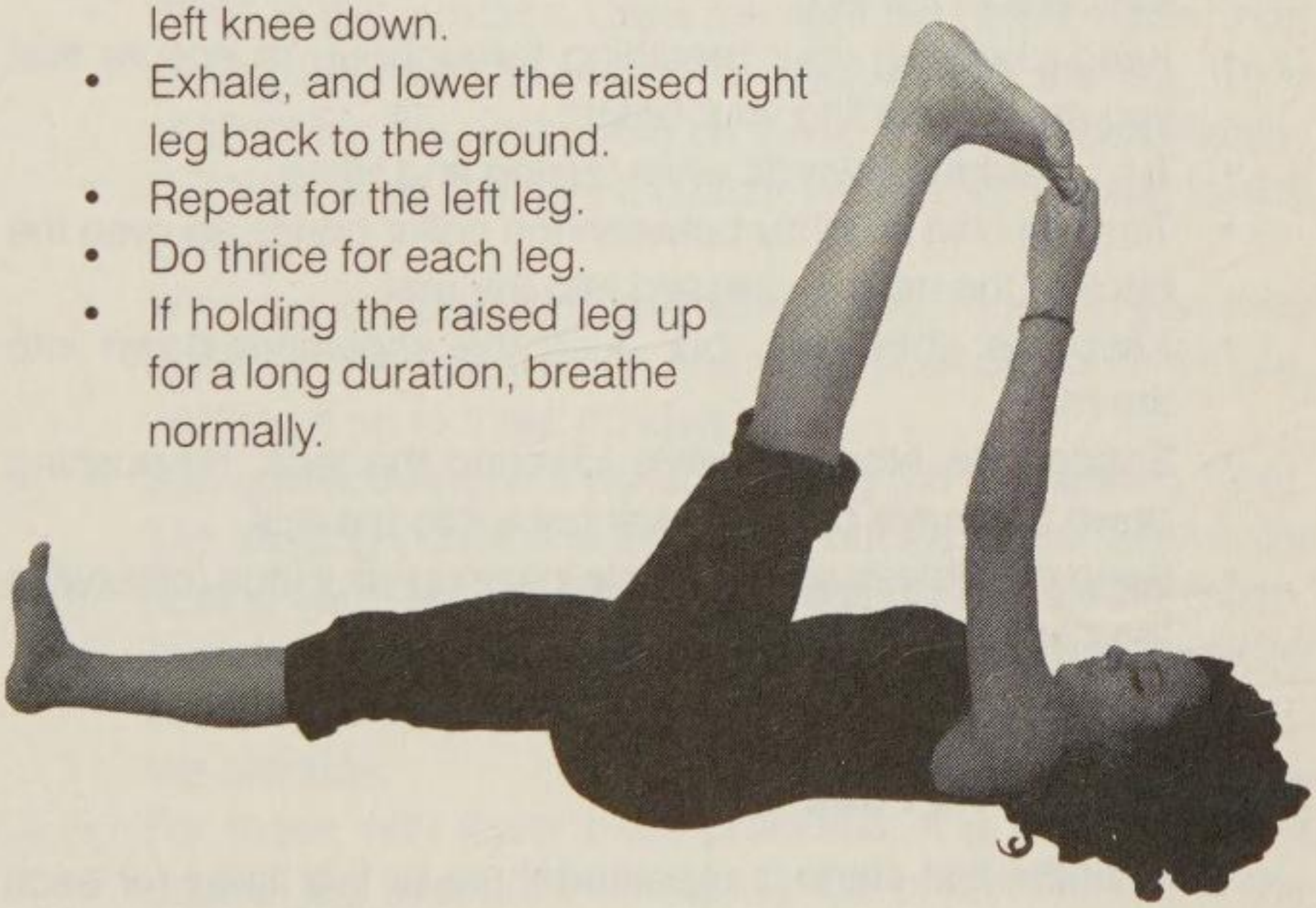
Supta padangushtasana, thus, is a valuable preparatory pose for the more advanced poses. This pose, and others like it, teach the participant how to isolate individual body parts, delve deeper into practice and achieve a meditative focus that is crucial to the more demanding and advanced poses such as the headstand (sirsasana) and the scorpion (vrschikasana).

Supta padangushtasana is also referred to as the raised leg pose or utthanpadasana. It may be done with one leg at a time, or with both legs together. The latter is more challenging.

The raised leg pose works on the lowest psychic chakra, the mooladhara. This simple pose therefore is all it takes to switch our life from a toxic or blocked state to one filled with vitality.

METHOD

- Lie on your back.
- Draw your feet together.
- Place your hands along your body, pressing the palms gently on the mat, along your hips.
- Push your feet out, dig the heels in, as if to place the soles flat against an imagined wall in front.
- To improve on this, turn the toes in.
- Inhale. Raise your right leg up. Try to hold it so it forms a right angle with the lower leg.
- Press down the back of the left thigh into the mat.
- To make this more precise, think of pressing the back of the left knee down.
- Exhale, and lower the raised right leg back to the ground.
- Repeat for the left leg.
- Do thrice for each leg.
- If holding the raised leg up for a long duration, breathe normally.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with lower back problems must avoid double leg raises. Or do it with the modification suggested in the section below labelled 'Progress in the Pose'.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- If, on raising the leg, the knee bends, as is likely if you are a beginner or not too flexible, do not raise the leg too high.

This will be counterproductive. Even if it takes a few weeks or months, hold the leg low only so far as the knee will remain straight. If the knees are bent due to stiffness, keep the raised knee low instead of attempting to maintain it at right angles to the floor.

- Press the lower back into the mat. This develops the core muscles of the stomach and back by engaging them.
- Push the back of the stretched lower leg, especially the back of that knee, into the mat.
- Keep the raised foot flat, as if pressing against the ceiling.
- Keep the foot of the lower leg flat also, as if to press into an imagined wall in front. This will release tense muscles along the back of the leg.
- Keep checking your breathing throughout, to ensure that you are not holding your breath.
- Turn feet/toes inwards while resting and lifting.
- Turn the chin in lightly between the collar bones so even the back of the neck is pressed into the mat.
- Keep the chest out, but push the shoulders down into the mat.
- Engage the stomach while lowering the legs, by pushing down the curve of your lower back into the mat.
- Keep your knees straight while lowering your legs (otherwise the core muscles are not being utilized).

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- After the first stage is repeated three or five times for each leg, move into the next stage.
- Lift the right leg. Inhale. Exhaling, hold it with both hands at the thigh, drawing the leg towards the head.
- Elbows may be flared slightly out. Press the curve of the lower back into the mat.
- Keeping the back pressed down as much as possible, continue pushing the back of left thigh down on to the mat.
- Ensure both legs are straight at the knee. Initially this may be difficult, but being aware of any lift in the knees is important

to correct the pose long-term, and get the flexibility it promises.

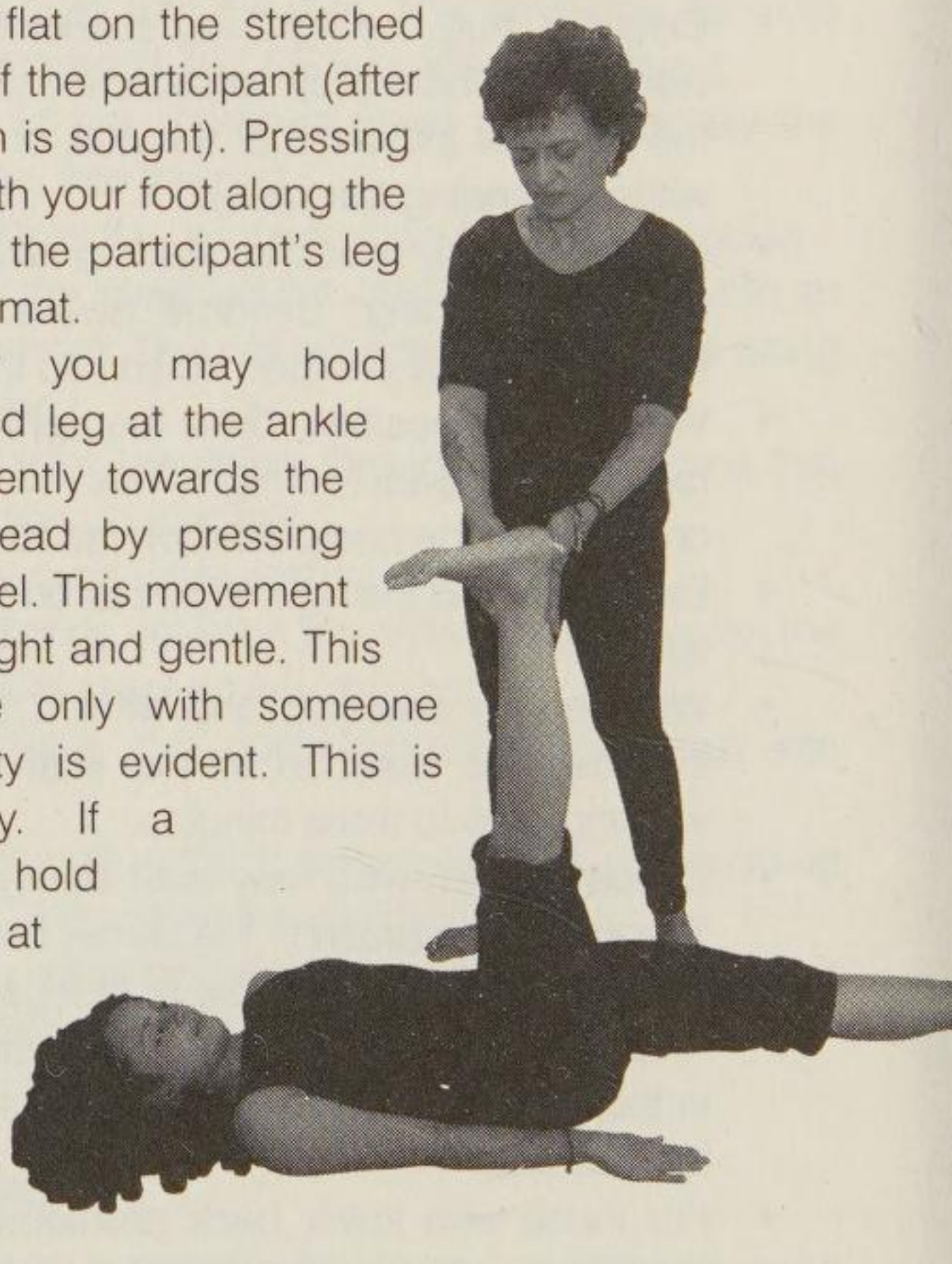
- After holding each leg for a minute or so, advance into the third and final stage of the practice.
- Inhale, to raise the right leg.
- Exhaling, hug the right leg at the thigh with both palms, walking the hands up towards the ankle (or elsewhere on the leg – for instance, at the calf, or where you may reach without bending the knee).
- Simultaneously raise the head up and off the floor. Continue normal breathing. Become aware of the left leg also, keeping it firmly pressed down into the mat.
- While in this position, draw the right leg down, rather than raising the head too high. This will stretch the leg, while challenging the neck. Hold on for 10 to 15 seconds initially.
- Exhale to drop the right leg back on the mat. Repeat for the left leg.
- With regular practice, and after a few months, you may increase the duration in the final position to a minute, working it up to three minutes.
- Simultaneously you may start doing the double leg raise. The starting position is the same, but instead of alternately raising each leg, you raise both legs up with an inhalation. And drop them down with an exhalation. The arm positions in this are numerous and each gives a challenging twist to the practice.
- For those with lower back problems, it is best to do the double leg raises after keeping the palms flat under the hips. This softens the effort, reducing the load on the back.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

You may use the above suggestions as part of a continuous form of verbal feed in a class. This keeps the students involved with the body and the pose. These are the cues they expect from an instructor since they will either forget or lose awareness midway, due to boredom or even pain. Repeating such suggestions

engages the mind, so the student does not feel discomfort or ennui, and will enjoy the practice rather than suffering or enduring it with difficulty. When the mind is fully occupied with the pose the student feels exhilarated, rather than exhausted or tired.

- As the instructor, you may gently place your foot/sole flat on the stretched out lower leg of the participant (after due permission is sought). Pressing down gently with your foot along the thigh will push the participant's leg further into the mat.
- Simultaneously you may hold the other raised leg at the ankle and draw it gently towards the participant's head by pressing down at the heel. This movement must be very light and gentle. This may be done only with someone whose flexibility is evident. This is gauged easily. If a participant can hold the raised leg at a right angle to the ground, it is a sign of flexibility that lends itself to progress.



- Also cues must be sought from the participant constantly to see that you are not yanking the leg with undue pressure, causing resistance or even injury. Any harsh movement will lead to the participant contracting muscles. (This is true even for those using this manual as a practitioner's guide – sudden or jerky movements contract the muscles, sabotaging the pose.) Therefore such assistance must not be extended to those who are stiff. Also some students resent such corrections when

they are tired or believe they are not flexible. Therefore, permission must always be sought before extending such assistance. Ideally, assistance must be extended only to those who need that little extra push to get further into the pose.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The pose prepares the participant for other practices, including advanced poses, like the headstand.
- The drag against gravity experienced by the legs and the neck in the final stage of this pose is essential for strengthening and preparing a participant for inversions. The raised leg pose cannot be underestimated in this respect; it is a core practice which not only prepares a participant for advanced poses but also protects her from mistakes she may make on the mat.
- The raised leg pose makes the legs flexible, preparing it to bear the body's weight in other advanced poses.
- It eases the participant into meditative seated postures like the lotus pose (padmasana) and thunderbolt pose (vajrasana). Indeed, the execution of most other yogic practices, including meditation, is facilitated by the raised leg pose.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The stress felt in the mind gets lodged within the body at the legs and the pelvic region. This gets released during this practice.
- The raised leg pose helps in the treatment of insomnia.
- It loosens up the hip region, preparing the participant for advanced poses, as well as for meditative poses like the lotus.
- The neck and shoulder are very important for controlled breathing and for throwing the voice. This pose helps

the participant improve her communication and gain confidence.

- The raised leg pose rids the participant of depression, since blood circulation in the pelvic region (urogenital system) is improved. This promotes the release and circulation of feel-good hormones like oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine.
- It reduces anxiety and hyperventilation, helps manage anger, and is a calming pose.

PSYCHIC

- This pose engages the mooladhara chakra.
- It soothes and harmonises the hyperactive and anxious vata dosha and the fiery pitta dosha.
- In acupressure and Chinese medicine any pose that involves the neck works to clear the nine important energy pathways that run along the neck region.

PHYSICAL

- The raised leg pose exercises and tones the core muscles at the abdomen and back. It impacts the digestive system so it functions properly, and the back muscles so they can support the spinal column.
- It helps deal with all back problems, especially lower back issues, even stubborn ones like sciatica. Is used both as a preventive asana and as therapy.
- The raised leg pose prevents hip injury in the elderly.
- It rectifies postural defects.
- The neck muscles are utilized when we breathe. This pose boosts respiration.
- The raised leg pose is used to heal knee problems by making the supporting muscles in the lower leg and thighs strong.
- It trims fat along the thighs, hips and waist, especially if held for long.
- The raised leg pose tones the pelvis. Excessive running or doing the wrong type of exercise can weaken the pelvic

floor. This asana firms the pelvic region. This explains its use in therapy for uterus prolapse.

- It prevents hernia.
- This asana helps treat problems of the urogenital system for both men and women.
- Furthermore, the asana helps control pain during menstruation.
- The raised leg pose is used to treat heart ailments. This must be emphasized since when leg muscles become supportively strong, they take a major load off the overworked heart.
- The asana is useful when treating and controlling major ailments such as high blood pressure and diabetes which make the body very stiff.
- The raised leg pose is ideal for those in sports, including running and cycling. Usually the legs of such sportspersons become stiff due to the development of fast twitch muscle fibres (used for quick movements of the body). This pose helps develop and strengthen the slow twitch muscle fibres needed for endurance sports. It also helps in the process of muscle repair and healing, through improved blood circulation, which in turn helps transport oxygen, repair agents, and remove cellular debris that collects around an injury.

ADVANCED VARIATION

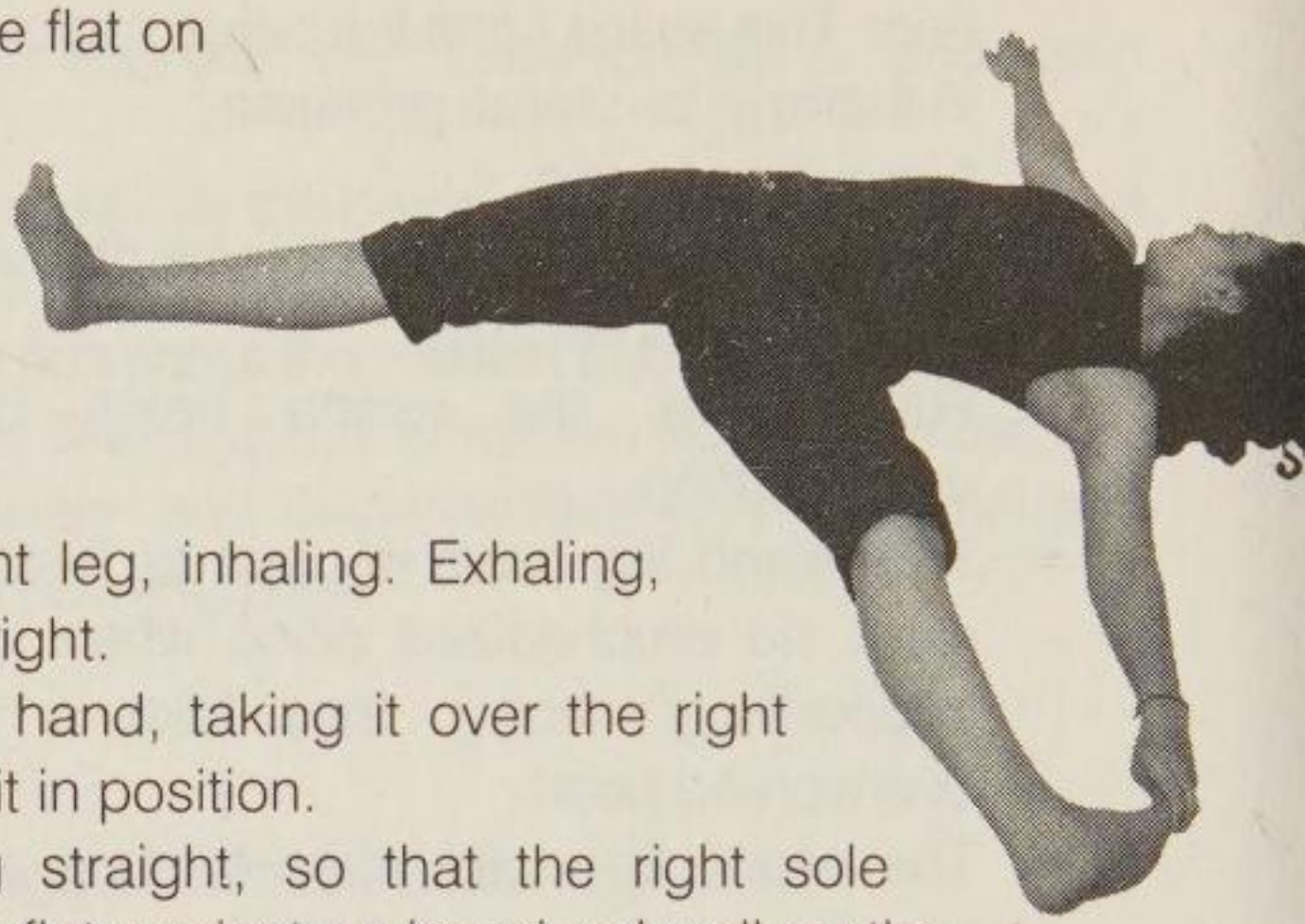
SUPTA PADANGUSTHASANA

(VARIATION 2: DROPPING THE LEG TO THE SIDE)

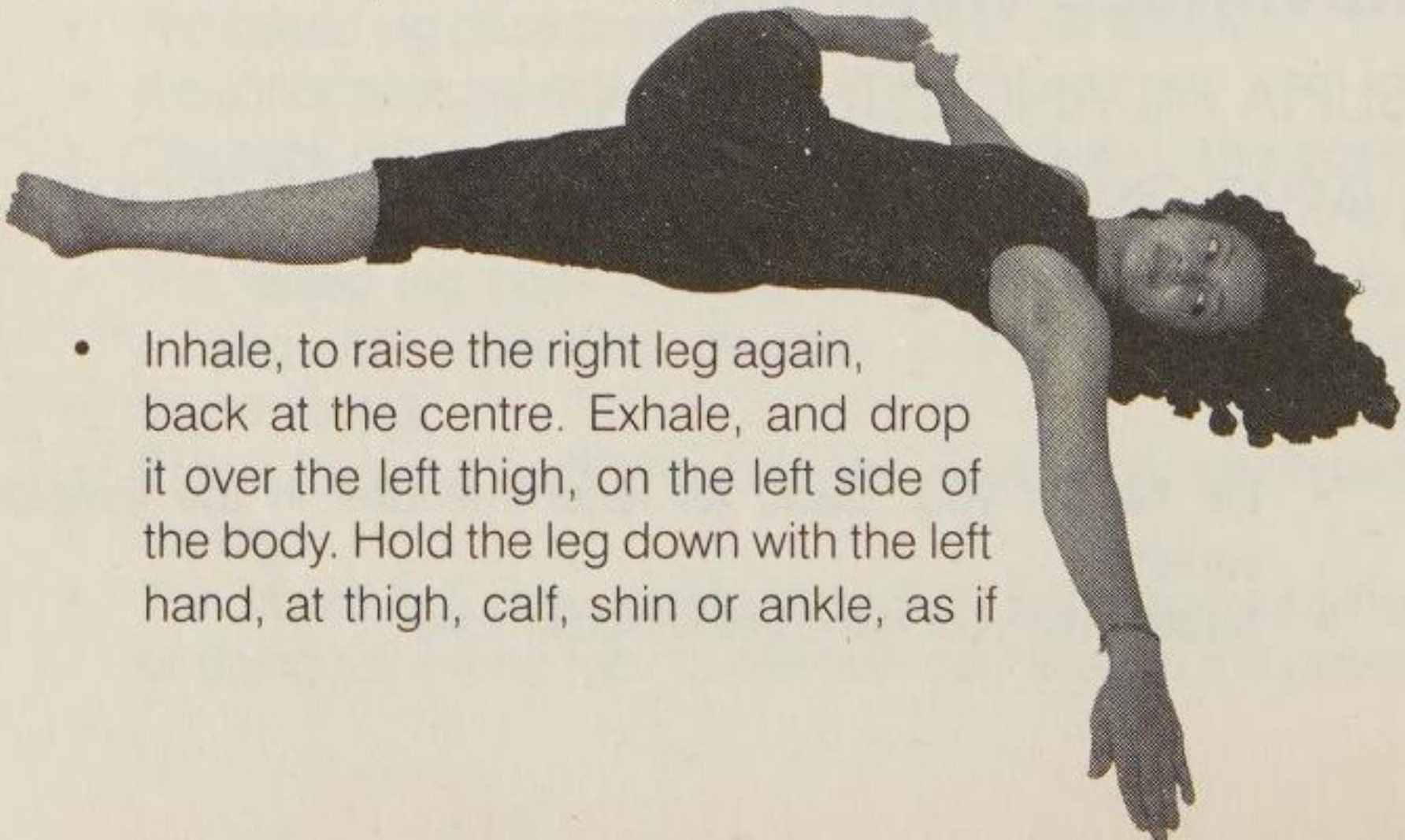
METHOD

- Lie flat on your back, as recommended in the simpler variation.
- Stretch out your hands at shoulder level.

- Palms must be flat on the ground, shoulders must be pushed back into the mat.



- Raise the right leg, inhaling. Exhaling, drop it to the right.
- Use the right hand, taking it over the right thigh, to hold it in position.
- Keep the leg straight, so that the right sole appears to be flat against an imagined wall on the right. Aim to form a right angle with both legs.
- Press down both legs isometrically, so they both remain flat on the ground. This may not be entirely possible but attempting it will engage all the muscles in the legs.
- Inhale. Exhale, turning the head to look at the left hand.
- The toes of either foot should be turned in, towards the body. Continue normal breathing while holding the pose, even while corrections are being suggested and made.
- Take the right hand from above the leg to hold the leg at the thigh, calf, shin or ankle (this depends on your flexibility), to draw it up, as if towards the ear. This extends the stretch at the hip region. Hold this for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Inhale, raise the right leg back. Exhale, drop it straight down to the floor, to the starting position.



- Inhale, to raise the right leg again, back at the centre. Exhale, and drop it over the left thigh, on the left side of the body. Hold the leg down with the left hand, at thigh, calf, shin or ankle, as if

drawing it towards the ear. Passing the hand over the leg is a good way to ensure a firm grip.

- Inhale, stretch out the right hand to the right side, palm down, at shoulder level.
- Exhale, twist the head to look at right hand. Continue normal breathing throughout.
- After a few seconds, raise the right leg back to centre. Exhale, to drop it back to the starting position.
- Repeat for the left leg.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

None.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Do not draw the stretched legs too high or wide if either knee is bending.
- Press back the shoulders into the mat. This will tone and release the upper back substantially.
- If you focus on breathing properly, keep the muscles loose, and relax the pose (especially at the torso), it becomes relatively easier to hold the asana for a long duration.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Extending the duration in the final position on either side to a minute or more will substantially enhance all the benefits.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

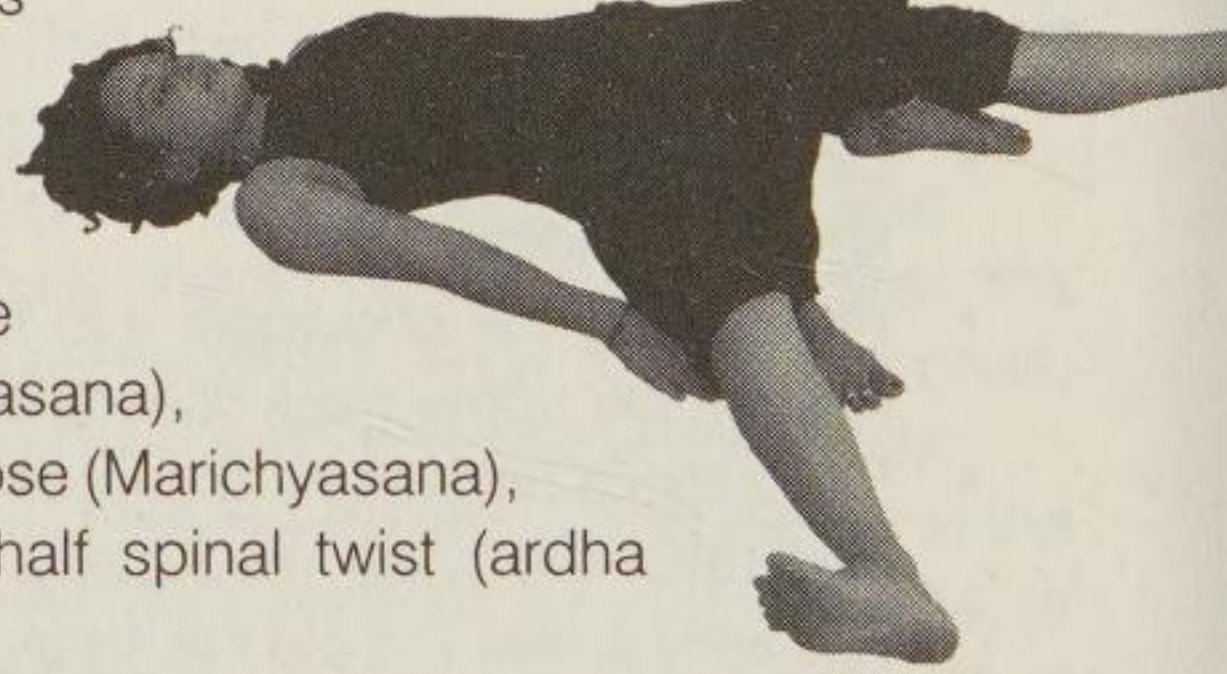
- As the instructor, pressing at either thigh gently with your foot will help push down the participant's leg(s) back into the mat.
- At the final stage of the pose, you may stand with your back to the participant, each foot against the participant's inner

thighs. When you inch your feet out, the student's hip stretch will extend further.

- Again, be verbally in constant touch with the participant to ensure that you are not putting undue pressure on her. Such intervention is a matter of experience and practice, and a new teacher may want to be careful and allow the students to do the extension themselves.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This variation helps with advanced twists.
- When the abdomen gets used to such asanas it facilitates advanced poses that involve hand locks, like the locked lotus pose (baddha padmasana), Sage Marichya's pose (Marichyasana), and the classical half spinal twist (ardha matysendrasana).



BENEFITS

- The benefits are as for the simple leg raise, but more enhanced.
- This variation especially impacts the urogenital system, which in turn impacts one's mood, and uplifts it.
- The variation improves flexibility along the spine and all the limbs. It helps tone the spinal nerves, which are responsible for conditioned reflexes.
- It has a powerful impact on the digestive system, toning it. This in turn keeps one looking young, due to an improvement in the absorption of nutrients.

SIRSASANA

(HEADSTAND)

This is one of the most exciting poses, both to teach and learn oneself. In fact, learning it pins one's discipline on the mat more firmly. This is why, unless the practitioner has a health issue for which headstand is contraindicated (see below), this pose must be taught. Also, unlike other poses which may be taken for granted with practice, this pose continues to be a challenge even when mastered – the student is led into increasing the duration in the pose, adding variations of it which challenge other muscle groups, even learning different ways of entering the pose. All of this ensures that the student's time on the mat is never boring.

The beautiful message of raja yoga (the practice of mind control) – the ability to step back from oneself – is taught most effectively by this pose. The fifth limb of yoga called pratyahara (involution of the indriyas or senses) is also best intuited by this pose. It teaches one the yogic goal of vairagya or dispassion – to step back from the initial disorientation of the body and mind, the biological fear for falling, and the inner chatter of the mind. It urges one to focus. With this pose, yogic philosophy translates into actual practice.

If the raised leg pose works on the mooladhara chakra, this pose works on the ultimate and highest crown centre, the sahasrara chakra.

Since this pose puts a lot of physical pressure on us, leads to a blood gush in the brain, and has a direct impact on the nervous system, it is believed to relieve us of anxiety and negativity. No wonder the headstand is celebrated as the king of all poses!

PLEASE NOTE

- The steps/instructions are given below. For simpler poses like the raised leg, you, as the teacher, may give instructions and expect to have them followed flawlessly by participants in a yoga class. But with the headstand, not all participants will be able to do that. Teaching it needs individual attention and monitoring. You may have to stand behind the student to ensure the student does not fall back. You may also have to break the class into groups to be able to ensure that you can provide personal attention.
- Only the very healthy and those who have an active physical life that exercises different parts of the body will be able to master the pose at first attempt. If you feel the student is weak or lacks balance, it may be wiser to start her on strengthening preparatory poses like the raised leg and its variations to prepare the neck, back and shoulders for the headstand. Standing balancers are also a great way to infuse confidence into the very timid students.
- Regular sun salutation (surya namaskar) with an emphasis on the downward-facing dog (adhomukha svanasana), the standing forward stretch (uttanasana), and the plank pose (setuasana) will also prepare the shoulder, neck and back for the headstand. The dolphin pose (sisulasana) could be rated as the best preparatory asana for this pose. In fact, those who do not have a background in physical exercise and wish to learn the headstand should practise the dolphin pose to tone the neck, shoulders and core muscles. The dolphin pose must be practised for a few weeks till sufficient strength is acquired for the headstand.
- The headstand is extremely stimulating. It is also psychically regarded as a 'male' pose, with the attendant attributes of heating the body, hiking metabolism, and boosting neurochemicals that excite the mind. Therefore it must always be followed by a pose like the shoulder-stand (sarvangasana) which is regarded as the 'queen of poses', psychically associated with the female qualities of calming

and grounding. It is regarded as the cooling counter-pose to the heating headstand.

- One must always go up in the headstand after sitting in the baby pose (balasana) since this will calm, cool and centre the mind. Also, since the baby pose is a forward-bend, it flushes the brain with blood, preparing the head for the greater rush and pressure that will occur as one goes up in the headstand.
- Also, always end the headstand with the baby pose. This will gently re-settle the brain and the rest of the body, so it gets used to the reverse flow of blood.
- Lie back in the corpse pose (shavasana), with legs apart and hands away from the body, palms up, for half a minute or so, for the same reason, after doing the headstand.
- Often beginners, either due to excitement or anxiety, will subconsciously contract the muscles of the neck and upper back. A few neck rolls or shoulder releasing poses are recommended after sitting up or even while lying down. This will release contracted muscles. Some beginners will hold the headstand with a deep curve which stresses the lower back and/or some part of the spine. Pushing the curve of the lower back into the mat while lying back on the mat in this case will relieve the tension in that region. It is good to release all unnecessary contractions before moving into the next pose.
- There are some basic 'surprises' students or beginners to the pose are likely to present. Shutting the eyes while going up is one of them. Very shy or sensitive students tend to do that. Some of them manage to get up into the headstand despite that, or because of that, since they shut out the mind. However, if they choose to hold the pose for a long duration, this may come in the way, since they lose a sense of proprioception (a psychosomatic awareness of the position of one's body) and may not realise that there is a shift in the centre, and they have either moved their legs or their hips out of the required alignment. This may cause a fall, and it could be a nasty one since it catches them

off guard. For beginners, therefore, the eyes should ideally be open.

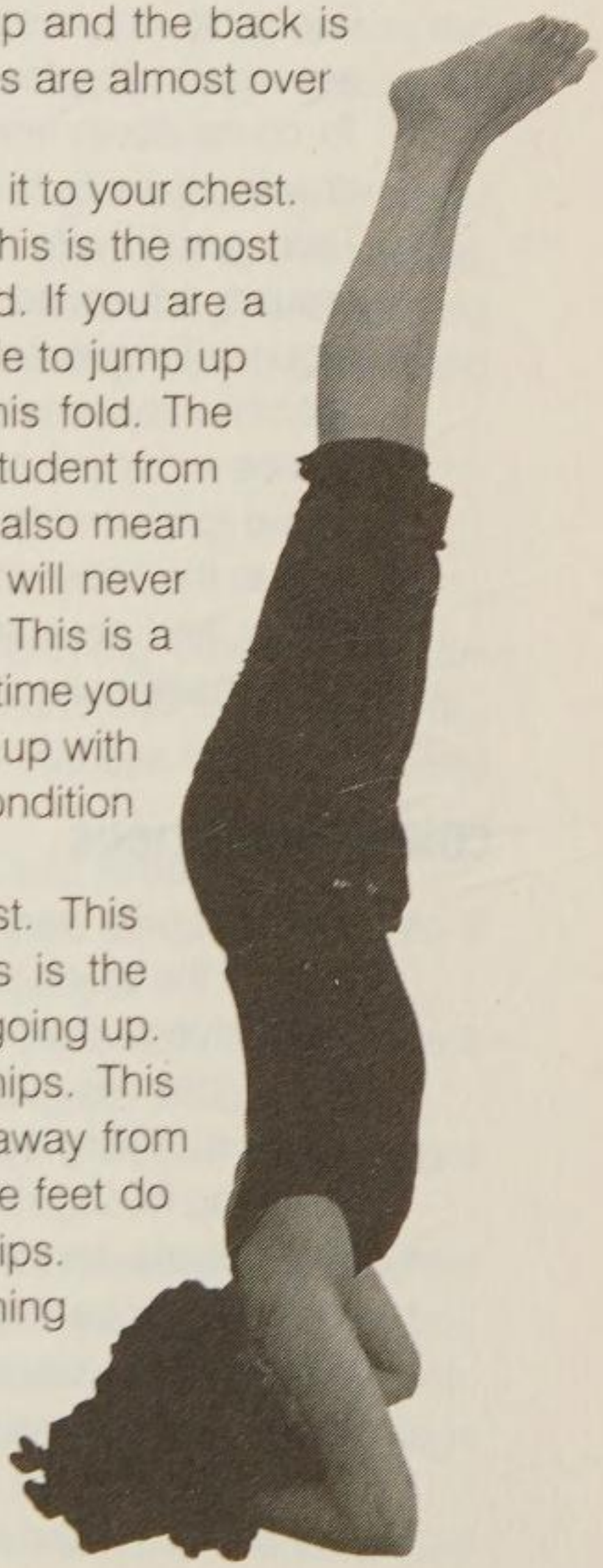
- Most beginners will also hold their legs or feet in the front, as a subconscious safety precaution, protecting themselves from a backward fall. Initially, this may be allowed till the sense of disorientation leaves them. But afterwards the finer corrections (given below) must be incorporated to ensure the body is in one line, legs forming a straight line with the torso and shoulders. If the correction is not made the pose will cause a lot of stress to the neck and lower back. This can create spinal disorders and postural defects in the long-term.

METHOD

- To do the headstand, kneel on the ground, cup your hands at the elbows, the thumb and index finger of each hand flaring over the inner elbow of the opposite arm.
- Place the locked elbows on the mat.
- Open the hands, interlocking the fingers to form a cup with both hands. This creates the tripod, on which you will be raising yourself. The elbows should be firmly on the mat.
- Place the head now carefully at the hands. It is important to note how you place your head. If it is too high on the hands, your head will wobble. You must place it just so, with the top edge of the forehead at the little fingers. Some beginners may also feel extreme discomfort at the little fingers, but this disappears with practice in a few weeks. Place the head just off the little fingers. Those nervous about being distracted by the potential pain or precision required may practise the first stage for a few days/weeks till the hands and fingers get acclimatized to the pressure. The placement of the fingers at the forehead (not under it) will also prevent this pain.
- Raise your hips. Raise the knees off the ground, to walk your feet towards the hands.
- Ensure the elbows do not move. If you have unconsciously

shifted your elbows, cup your hands once more, as before, to settle down. This is very important since the triangle you create with your hands and elbows creates the perfect base on which to place your body weight. If the elbows flare out too much, or have moved too close, the foundation for your headstand will be very shaky! Any movement from the elbows when you are up in the headstand will cause you a fall.

- Keep walking the feet to the head till you reach the point where the hip is pointed up and the back is curved. You must walk till the hips are almost over the shoulders.
- Fold one leg at the knee, holding it to your chest.
- Fold the other leg at the knee. This is the most important stage in the headstand. If you are a beginner, you will find it irresistible to jump up into the pose directly, without this fold. The instructor must discourage the student from that urge, since that mistake will also mean the back muscles and the neck will never learn to fold and lift the legs up. This is a learned technique and worth the time you invest in it. Also those who move up with a jump are creating the ideal condition for a fall.
- Hold the folded knees to chest. This should be held confidently. This is the next most important stage while going up.
- Move the heels back towards hips. This opens the knees, moving them away from the chest. At this point ensure the feet do not move too far back, over the hips.
- Gently open the legs, straightening them over the torso.
- The body must be in one line, the legs over the shoulders, with no curve at the spine once



you are up. The feet, the hip bones and the shoulders are aligned in one straight line. A curved spine, often an issue with beginners and even with advanced students, strains the neck and lower back substantially. Unfortunately many people learn to hold the headstand with strength. And may continue doing it for years. Actually, a good headstand is a light pose, and held with focus more than strength.

- If attempting for the first time, hold for just a few seconds. Ensure that the feet are not falling loosely or too tight. Focusing on keeping the knees straight will help you accomplish this feat to some extent. Keep the legs together.
- To come down from the pose, fold the legs at the knees, drawing them to the chest.
- Then gently, with control, lower one foot at a time to the ground. Advanced students can lower both feet down to the ground. If beginners wish to drop both feet down, sometimes out of nervousness they drop the knees down instead. This can be extremely painful. So it is best to practise one foot at a time to control this nervous descent.
- Rest in the baby pose for a while.
- Sit up, and do a few neck rolls to relieve any strain at the upper back or neck.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Students with very high blood pressure should avoid this pose. If the blood pressure is brought under control through regular yoga practice within a few weeks or months – as is likely – one may attempt the pose.
- Those suffering from severe circulatory system disorders, including heart problems, should avoid the headstand.
- This pose is not recommended during menstruation.
- It must also be avoided during severe toxic conditions like constipation, since the pose can be counterproductive, pushing the toxins back into the body.
- The headstand must be discouraged for those with severe eye problems like retinal detachment and glaucoma.

- Since beginners tend to shift the weight wrongly on the neck, ideally they must also not attempt this pose if suffering from neck issues, including cervical spondylosis. Again, if the problem has been brought under control after a few weeks or months through yoga sadhana and a medical examination clears the student, the pose may be attempted.
- Since this is a heating practice, one must avoid it if unwell, or suffering from inflammatory conditions, including fever, or infections, especially in the ear. Remember, the headstand pushes bodily stuff inwards, so it must not be attempted if there are infections or toxic conditions which should be eliminated first.
- Though there may be a sense of eagerness to try this over other poses, one must practise the other therapeutic poses, get all physical problems under control, and phase learning so the body to gets used to yogic asanas before attempting this pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

The headstand is a pose with a long learning curve. It can be constantly fine-tuned. After the initial disorientation is dealt with, finer corrections must be made to ensure that one is able to extend the duration of the pose.

- A good headstand must feel light and strong.
- You must float up into it, rather than jump into it, even if learning this muscular effort takes longer.
- When you walk your feet towards the head, feel your back curve, push down the elbows, firming up the base.
- Keep the legs straight when you walk ahead. This will ensure that the hips rise up properly.
- When you fold the knees, ensure the knees are close to the chest. This accentuates the curve. If you're a beginner, you might resist this due to the pressure you feel at the neck. But if this stage is not learnt properly, you will open the legs off the centre, in the front.
- Moving the heels to the hips will release the legs, unfold

them and make it easier to straighten up. The neck and elbows are substantially involved in the lift, so keep your focus on the elbows, and the upper back will automatically help you go up smoothly.

- In a good headstand, even if you are heavy at the waist, the stomach will naturally cave in. If your stomach is popping out, chances are you have wrongly transferred the weight to your neck or your lower back.
- Always give the class or yourself simple cues. Stick to the technique instead of theorising about it. While questions must always be encouraged, talking of poses in the abstract will not get one very far!
- If you feel that you have lost balance, always give yourself just one cue while you fall – *feet*. This way, whether you fall forwards or backwards, your knee, back and neck will be protected. If the feet fall ahead, you protect the vulnerable knees. If the feet fall behind, the upper back will automatically lift off the ground, protecting the entire spine and neck.
- You can also roll down by curving the back. But this is not something that can be consciously controlled!
- Most beginners believe that the headstand should be rigidly held. Au contraire, it is a pose where you experience a slight sway as the body moves lightly with the breath. If you hold the headstand rigidly, the body will become heavy and your muscles will fatigue quickly, bringing you down sooner than you'd like.
- Because of the slight sway mentioned above, beginners tend to hold the breath. Remember not to stop breathing while holding the pose. If you accept that the sway is felt and accentuated when you breathe, and learn to focus on each inhalation and exhalation, with time you begin breathing normally. The breath in turn powers muscles which are getting stronger as they learn to hold on against gravity.
- Clearly, the mind must constantly watch and correct itself during the asana. The pose therefore can sharpen focus and make you rested yet alert – the perfect meditative state.

- Do not stiffen the legs, or they will feel heavy very soon. Keep the feet pointing up, but hold the legs with elastic firmness, instead of contracting them rigidly. Ensure the legs don't flare. Most beginners mistake elasticity for looseness.
- Some beginners may also have a discomforting sense that their feet are cold. This is because of the blood leaving the legs and shifting to the torso, the heart and the brain. You must phase the learning till the blood flows naturally in the headstand. It is possible, if your feet feel cold, that you are pushing yourself over the limit with just one pose.
- Always be aware of when you become tired. Since this pose also stresses the heart (in a good way) you must allow your heart to acclimatize itself to the pose gently with regular practice.
- Always exit this pose (and other poses) the way you entered it – fold the legs back to the chest before gently dropping the feet back to the ground.
- If you are a beginner, do not shut your eyes while in the pose, since you may not be clued into when your hips have shifted back, or if you are about to fall. This fall could be a rather nasty shock and create inhibitions.
- Stick to the technique, even if it may take longer to complete the pose. Mistakes learnt by the body are most difficult to dislodge. Moreover, entering the headstand carelessly can create problems with its advanced variations as well as spawn postural defects.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The best and most subtle correction is at the shoulders. Once you get used to the pose, if you extend from the shoulders you will feel the body become lighter. This will also release the neck. Beginners normally collapse at the neck. A good headstand is actually held with the strength of your shoulders which helps release the tension at the neck.
- The subtle sway mentioned above also must be managed

by focusing on the shoulders. Do not try to stiffen yourself against the sway. Rather, flow with it, but with awareness so the subtle muscle fibres shift and tone up to hold you in place.

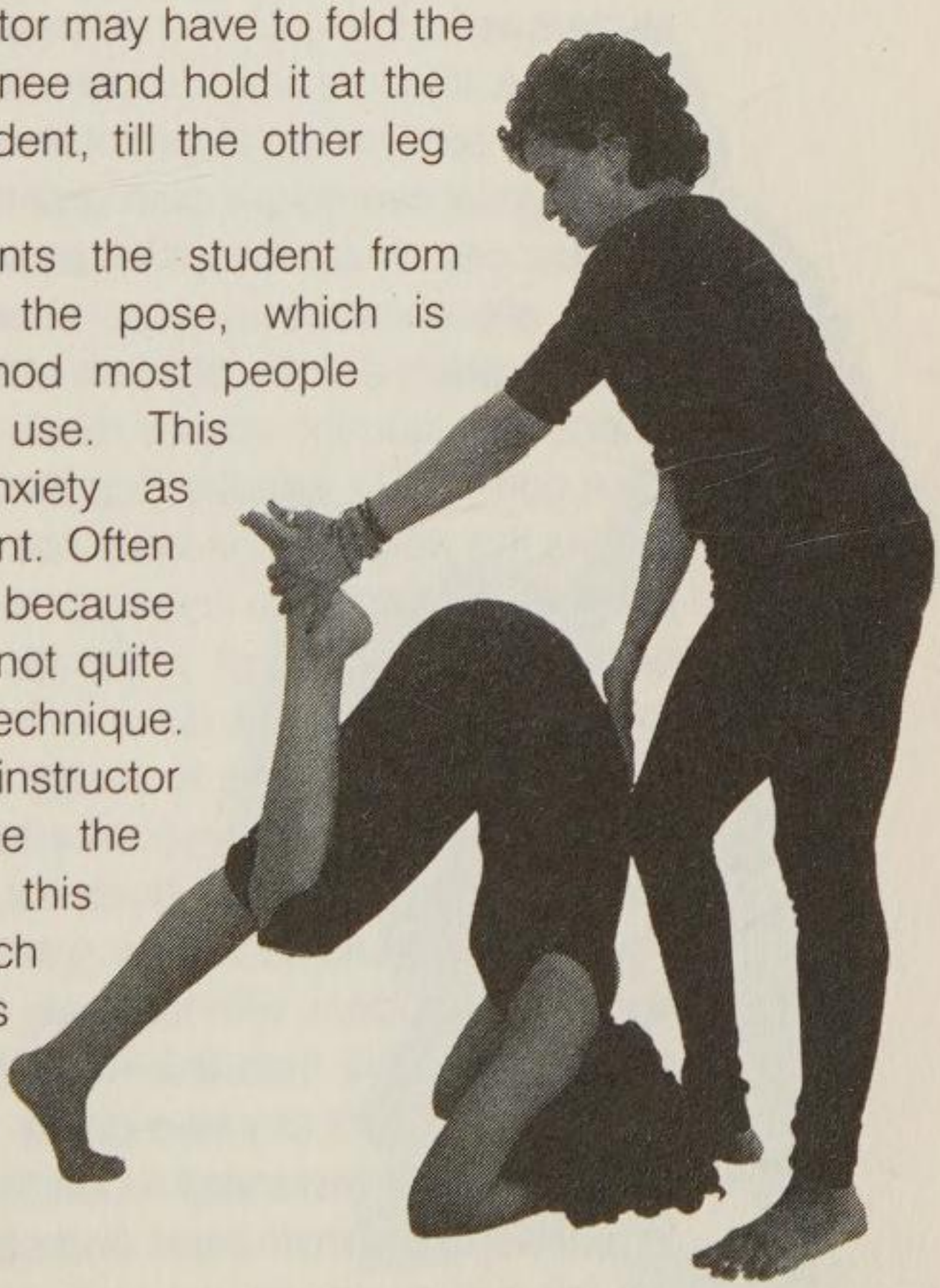
- The headstand is more exciting to hold than all the other asanas. However care must be taken that it is not held at the expense of other poses. Equal time must be spent on the other asanas in your repertoire. This cannot be overemphasised. If you're a beginner, hold the headstand for a minute or so, moving up to three to ten minutes as you advance in practice.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- This is one of the toughest poses to teach, which may explain why many teachers are wary of teaching it in their classes. However there are simple guidelines you, as the teacher, need to follow which will make it easy to teach the pose to even those who are several sizes larger than you!
- You must always watch over each student as they attempt the pose. A lot of time in a class must be invested in the headstand alone till the student gets over the anxiety, disorientation and excitement this pose evokes.
- While the headstand can be disorienting for lots of people – age and weight aren't criteria – those who have learnt co-ordinated movements through dancing, gymnastics, swimming or sports usually follow the technique faster. As an instructor, you must be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each student to gauge just how much attention each will need in the pose.
- Also, students with great focus can pick up the pose quickly, in the first few attempts. The timid ones may take longer. If they are very disoriented and do not understand how they hang in space, it is recommended that they attempt the other asanas in a meditative fashion before trying this pose which calls for clarity of mind.
- Some students may require you to stand behind them and lead them into the pose a few times before they gain in

confidence. The strength the instructor brings to the class normally can coax even timid students out of their zone. This comes with personal practice and experience, even for the instructor. A nervous instructor will make a student very nervous; a self-assured instructor can bring poise to a class.

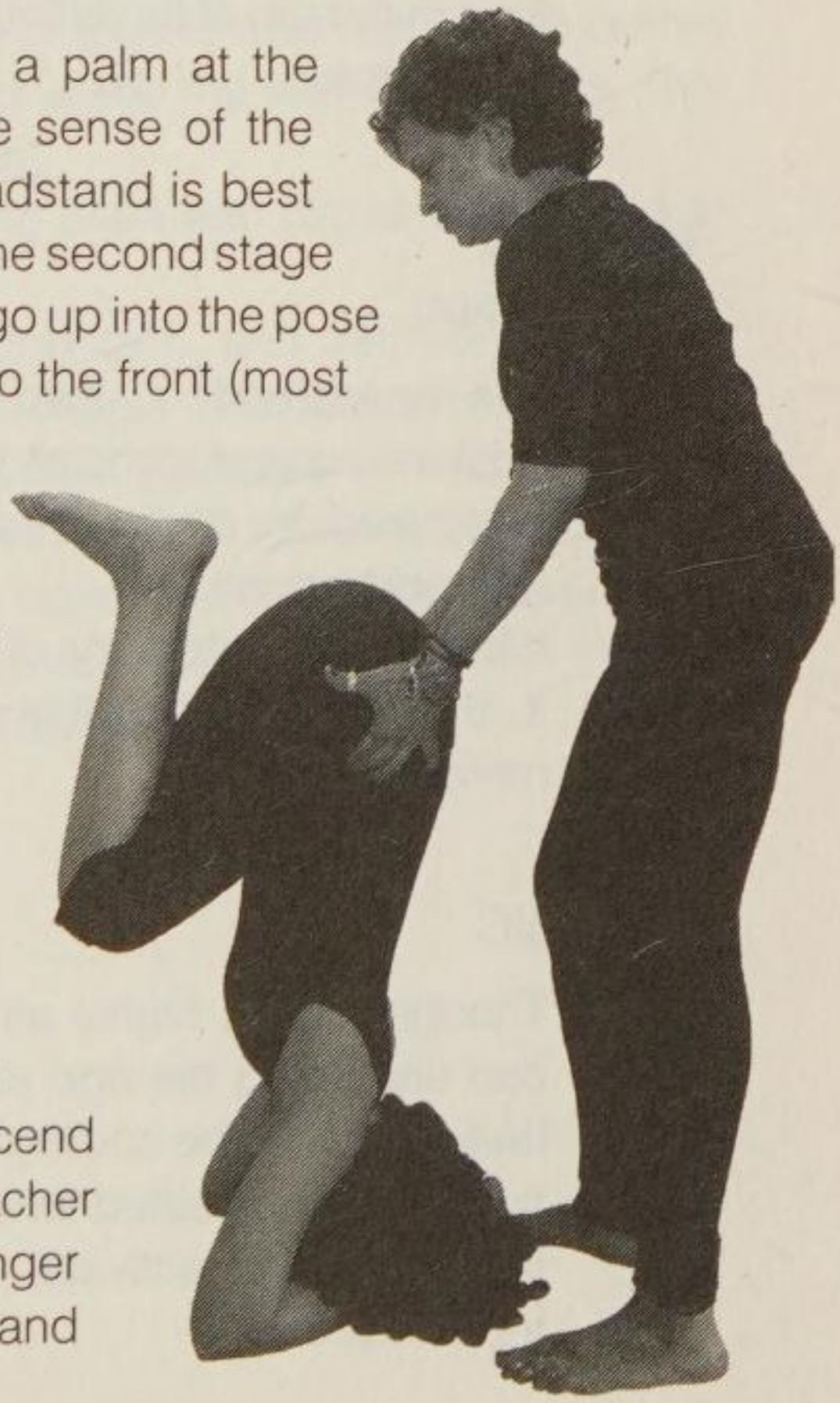
- The position of the instructor behind a student is very crucial. Placing the right foot out with the knee bent, as shown in image, allows the instructor to break a fall without getting kicked in the face. It allows the instructor to be close enough to the student without getting in the way.
- The instructor should stand on the dominant side of the student (the right side for the right-handed).
- Occasionally, till the student gains in back-strength or acquires a curve at the spine or gets her co-ordination in place, the instructor may have to fold the right leg at the knee and hold it at the chest of the student, till the other leg folds up.
- This also prevents the student from kicking up into the pose, which is the normal method most people subconsciously use. This comes from anxiety as well as excitement. Often it also happens because the student has not quite understood the technique. However the instructor must discourage the student from this since using such 'methods' gives the body a jerk and sends the student keeling backwards.



- Once the legs are folded at the chest, the cues may become verbal. They have to be simple.
- Often, the student may not process the cue words simply due to the disorientation this pose creates. In which case, a light tapping of the body part that is required to bend or open will help the student 'locate' that part. Tapping must be firm but gentle.
- The instructor's hold must also be firm but soft. Yanking the student often creates resistance and contraction. The student then remembers the correction with resentment; usually this means she will complain of pain as a 'punishment' to the instructor. This is the psychological fall-out of wrong handling, and is best avoided since it is clearly counterproductive and creates a lot of negativity!
- The knee of the instructor must be so placed that when the student walks the feet towards the head, the student's curved mid-back touches the instructor's knee. This immediately gives the student the sense of a centre from which the rest of the pose can flow. It also grants the student a sense of confidence – that a fall will be prevented by the instructor.
- There are some worst-case scenarios that are likely to happen when a timid student attempts this pose. One is where the student arches back awkwardly, curving the back completely, with the legs kicking about in space. This means the weight of the body has completely shifted to the neck. In this case, the instructor may have to use her entire body as a wall against which the student must be made to lean. This must be done even if the student is larger than the instructor. This is usually possible. But for this, the original position of the instructor, behind the student, is very important so the student does not push the instructor over. The instructor should not be right behind, but stand to the right of the student, with the body only half-way towards the student. This will help the instructor firm her legs into the ground to prevent any take-down.
- There are also instances when the student may wrap the legs around the instructor! And some disoriented students will fall completely on the instructor. The instructor should

be located so as to be able to brace against any such eventuality, yet hold the student up.

- Do not assist the disoriented student for too long. Sometimes students become overtly dependent on the teacher and will collapse if they sense the teacher has walked off from them. Some students will also expect to be helped up continually for months. Such dependence must be discouraged. Instead encourage students to use alternatives, like the inverted V or mountain pose (parvatasana, also referred to as the adhomukhasvanasana or the downward-facing dog pose) or the dolphin, which builds the same strengths as the headstand without an accompanying sense of disorientation.
- All students must be encouraged to attempt the second stage of the pose confidently, and urged to move into the third and final stage.
- The instructor may place a palm at the lower back to provide the sense of the centre from which the headstand is best held. This can be done in the second stage after the student is able to go up into the pose when she could tilt either to the front (most common amongst those who learn it fast) or tilt backwards (common amongst those who are nervous and still feeling disoriented).
- Sometimes holding lightly at the ankles will give confidence to a rank newcomer.
- To help the student understand how to descend from the pose the teacher may place the index finger and the thumb of each hand



at either hip. This is a gentle hold and does not interfere with the student's attempt to come down. This also gives a grip which is gentle yet firm. It may be used to slow down the descent. Even the student who is disoriented, if helped in this fashion, learns to come down very gently. The movement becomes part of muscular memory.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- Other poses, when well done, help one reach the headstand faster. Such poses include the shoulder-stand, the fish pose (matsyasana), the palm-tree pose (tadasana), and of course the leg raise.
- It prepares the participant for an advanced pose like the scorpion. In fact, unless the participant does the headstand for a minimum of three to five minutes, she must not attempt the scorpion.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

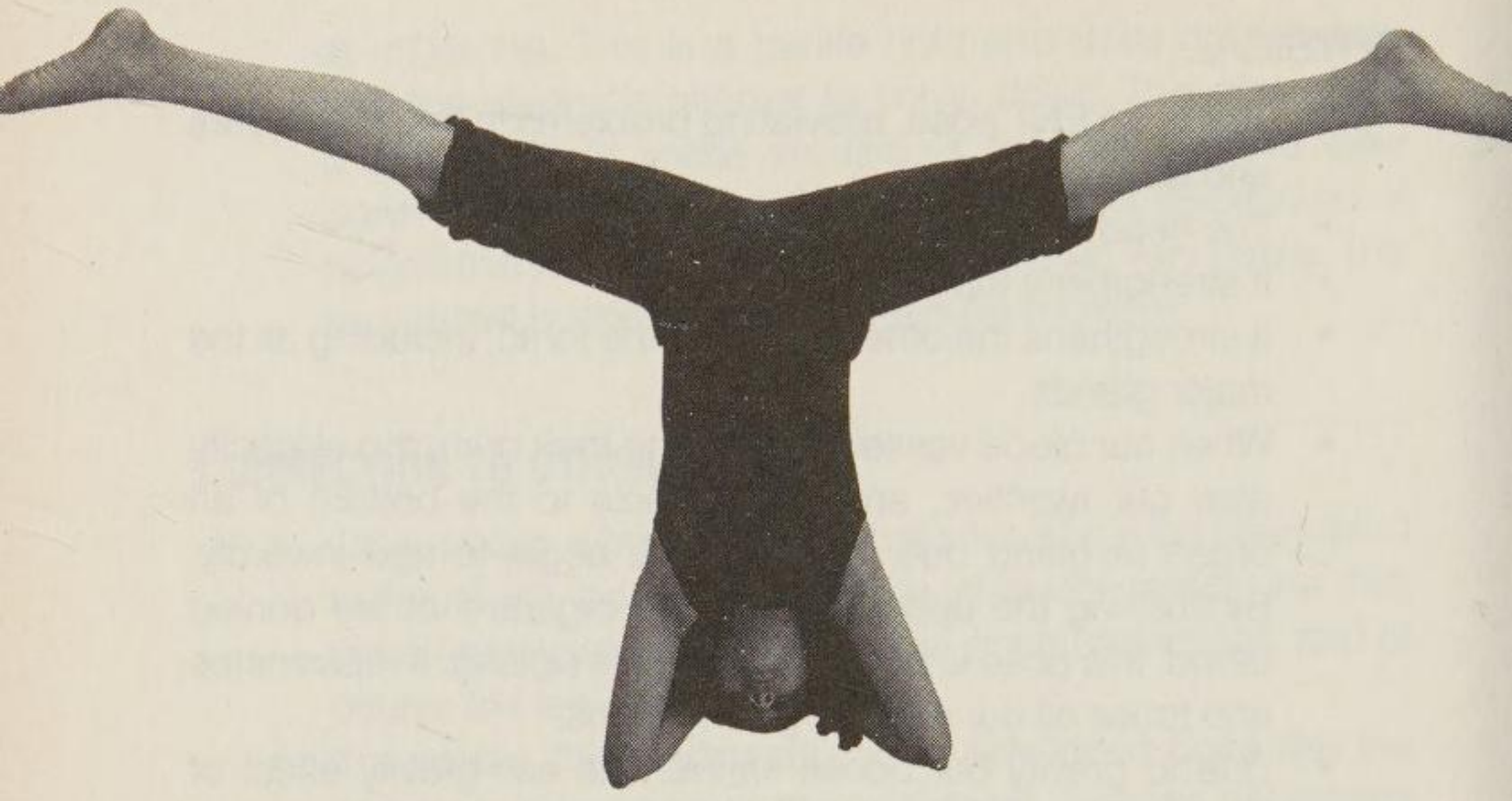
- The headstand is used to treat depression since it is exhilarating and stimulating.
- It is used to control hyper-anxiety because it is also a grounding pose.
- It helps revive memory, due to the blood gush to the brain.
- It is used to fight fatigue, resulting from stress or slow metabolism.

PSYCHIC

- Though valued highly as a spiritual pose, the headstand can also bring the ego to the fore! That is why it must be balanced with the cooling shoulder-stand, and surrendering poses like the seated forward-bend (paschimottanasana).
- It is said to activate the highest spiritual centre of the sahasrara.

PHYSICAL

- This is an ENT pose, alleviating problems in the throat, ears and nose.
- The headstand clears congestion.
- It strengthens the heart.
- It strengthens the other organs in the torso, including all the major glands.
- When our blood vessels start losing their pumping elasticity after our twenties, and blood pools to the bottom of an organ or gland due to gravity, we begin to age inwardly. By flushing the upper parts of the organs that are denied blood, this pose is believed to reverse ageing. It rejuvenates and tones all our major organ systems.
- Due to gravity our bones shrink. The anti-gravity effect of this pose, as also other inversions, prevents such shrinkage of bone. Normally, our skin tone is also lost as the bones shrink inwards and gravity drags the skin downwards. This pose is said to reverse that.
- The headstand flushes the brain with blood, and is said to revive brain cells.
- It is believed to hike metabolism, and that translates into better nutrient absorption, weight loss, and overall health.
- The headstand is used to treat insomnia.
- Though people with certain chronic ailments like migraine, headache (must not be done when there are episodes), asthma, diabetes, knee pain are wary of this pose, it offers therapeutic relief in these cases.



ADVANCED VARIATION

LEG SPLIT IN THE HEADSTAND

METHOD

- Do the basic headstand as explained earlier.
- Split the legs, dropping them gently to the sides.
- Continue normal breathing.
- Bring the legs back to the centre.
- Initially, you may attempt the leg split just a few times.
- As you gain confidence, you may do this dynamically and fast.
- Later, fit in a breathing sequence with the leg movement, exhaling as you drop the legs to the side, inhaling as you draw them back in.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the headstand.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- You have to push the hips back slightly, to be able to split the legs comparatively wider.
- Ensure either leg is straight at the knee before bringing the legs back to the centre.
- Mental awareness has to shift from the hips to the legs and most importantly to the elbows to ensure they do not lift up when the legs drop to the side. The pose is not only exhilarating but also meditative because the mind must be finely tuned in to the subtle shift of weight required to hold the body at the centre.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- There are several leg drop variations in the headstand. You may drop the legs back and forth.
- You may also drop the leg alternately to the ground, in the front.
- You may similarly drop either leg to the side on the ground.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Giving the cues listed above will usually get the student to perform the pose neatly.
- You may have to stand behind a timid student to see that the hips and elbows stay in position, since if the focus is not right, the student will move backwards and fall.

BENEFITS

- This variation makes the headstand more meditative.
- It prepares one for tougher poses like the scorpion.
- It strengthens the shoulders and arms.
- It tones the hips and the legs marvellously.

SALAMBA SARVANGASANA

(SUPPORTED SHOULDER-STAND)

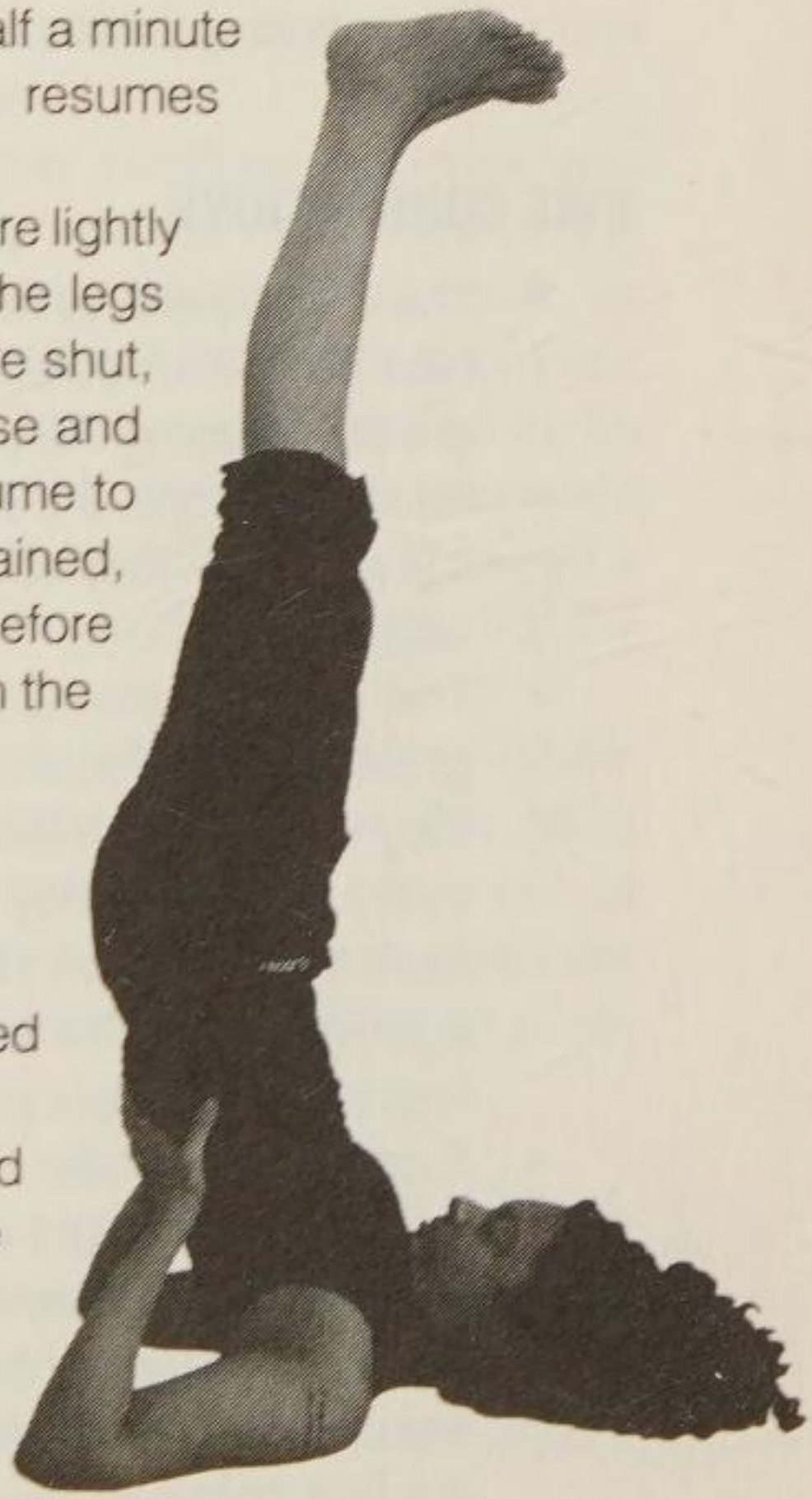
The Sanskrit 'sarvangasana' means a pose that works on all parts of the body. It is easier than the other classical inversion, the headstand. However, its perfect execution – where the body is perpendicular to the floor and practically on the neck – is difficult even for advanced practitioners. This stage can be achieved only through committed practice and happens when the neck becomes strong and flexible enough to hold the body aloft while it curves into an 'L'. It also demands immense strength from the back muscles which are, through practice, able to resist and hold on against gravity. Thus the popular translation – shoulder-stand – actually refers to a very early phase of the asana, when the entire weight is on the shoulders, rather than the neck.

Where the headstand is the king of poses, the shoulder-stand is referred to as the queen. This reference also has its own significance: the shoulder-stand is regarded as the 'cooler' of the two poses (the headstand is hot). It is also the more meditative posture, and free of bluster and ego (unlike the headstand), which may explain why for serious practitioners it is the ideal pose for deepening spiritual practice.

METHOD

- Lie on your back with your hands alongside the body.
- Inhale. Exhaling deeply, hoist the hips high, while pressing down the palms lightly.
- Only when the hips raise up should your move your palms up to hold the waist (or hips, for beginners).

- The elbows must be firmly on the ground. They must not flare out since this will lower the hips, ruining the pose and your progress in it. Continue normal breathing. Hold this pose for a few seconds.
- Inhale. Exhaling, lower the feet over the head slightly.
- Hold the pose for as long as it is comfortable, initially for a few seconds, then progressively increasing the timeframe to half a minute or more. Breathe normally throughout.
- To exit the pose, release the palms, placing the hands flat on the mat. Keep the legs low.
- Continue breathing normally, and lower the back starting from the upper back, mid-back and lower back, with the hips coming down last.
- Then inhale. Exhaling drop the legs straight down to the ground.
- Relax in the corpse pose for half a minute or more, or till breathing resumes to normal.
- In the corpse pose, the hands are lightly off the body, on the ground. The legs are also apart, and the eyes are shut, while the whole body feels loose and relaxed. Wait for breath to resume to normal. If the back feels strained, hug both knees to the chest, before releasing the legs, to lie back in the corpse pose.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Inversions are ideally avoided during periods.
- The pressure on the thyroid hikes the metabolism. So the refined and advanced version must be avoided by those with hyperthyroidism and

instead the safer alternative, the inverted psychic union pose (viparita karani mudrasana) may be practised.

- The shoulder-stand is best avoided by those with cardiac problems and high blood pressure, though those suffering from the latter problem may be taught the pose in a phased manner when blood pressure normalises.
- In inflammatory conditions or where there is an enlargement of glands (such as the spleen) this asana must be avoided.
- The shoulder-stand (and all other inversions) is also not recommended to those suffering from toxic conditions since it can prevent the release of toxins.
- Those with spinal problems, especially of the neck, must avoid the shoulder-stand till entirely healed. Those with lower back problems also need to phase their learning, and advance into it only after strengthening the back through the regular practice of the leg raises.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The main mistake beginners make is when they hoist the hips up. It is understandably done with a jerk because they are still gauging the strength needed for the hip lift. But after having attempted the pose and convinced themselves that it is possible, they should be taught to do it more gently and with control.
- The hips are the heaviest part of the body and there is a great deal of inbuilt timidity and concern about whether they will lift. Often this fear is unconscious. Some students worry that they may topple over. Interestingly, those who have this concern do topple over, but this is nothing to agonize over. The tendency to keel over stops once the fear leaves the body.
- A common mistake, even amongst advanced practitioners, is to take the weight of the hips (and thus, of the body) onto the palms. The hands must merely give you a sense of balance. The weight must be held aloft with the strength of the back and must not rest on the hands at all, at least after the first phase of struggle is over.

- The biggest concern is co-ordinating hand movement to support the hips. The hands should rise up only after the hips are in air. Often the hands come up before the hips lift. This will flare the elbows out, making the pose heavy (since the hips will be too low and thus succumb to gravitational drag which beginners are unused to dealing with).
- The elbows flaring out is another common mistake. Unfortunately, even advanced students may do this subconsciously, especially those with broad shoulders. A great and simple way to remember not to do this and correct it, is to ensure that the upper arms remain parallel to each other on the ground as you lift your hips up, and that each elbow is in line with the corresponding shoulder. This will limit the subconscious urge to flare the elbows out. Those who are especially broad will have no option but to wait till upper back flexibility allows for a more narrow and compact elevation into the pose.
- Another common error that may continue for years and must be corrected is the jerky upward movement of the shoulders and the head itself when the legs drop down, as one winds up the pose. This usually happens to beginners who do not have the core muscular strength required for an elegant exit from the pose. In certain classes this error is not corrected, when in fact It should be actively discouraged if the students care to develop the strength needed for the headstand.
- When descending from the pose, ensure the arms remain parallel to each other, as you begin to lower the hips. Most students will place the arms too far apart, often out of the mat. This must be corrected to bring more muscular awareness and control into the process of exiting the pose.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- It is very important to make the shoulder-stand sharp and compact. For beginners, there is an early pose that is actually an easier version of the classic shoulder-stand; it

is called the psychic union inverted pose. In this version, the brunt of the body's weight is borne by the shoulders. For the actual shoulder-stand however, the neck must take the load. So, to ease yourself into the advanced version, you have to bend both legs at the knees and draw them to your forehead. This makes the body very light and easy to manage. It also releases the palms and arms. Then, you may move the arms in closer together, so that the elbows also move in more closely under the body, and are in line with either shoulder. Using the palms to push the hips or back in will also help. When you straighten the legs up after that, you could ensure that your body is creating a neat plumbline, with the shoulders, hips and the feet aligned. Only then will the neck learn to take the load.

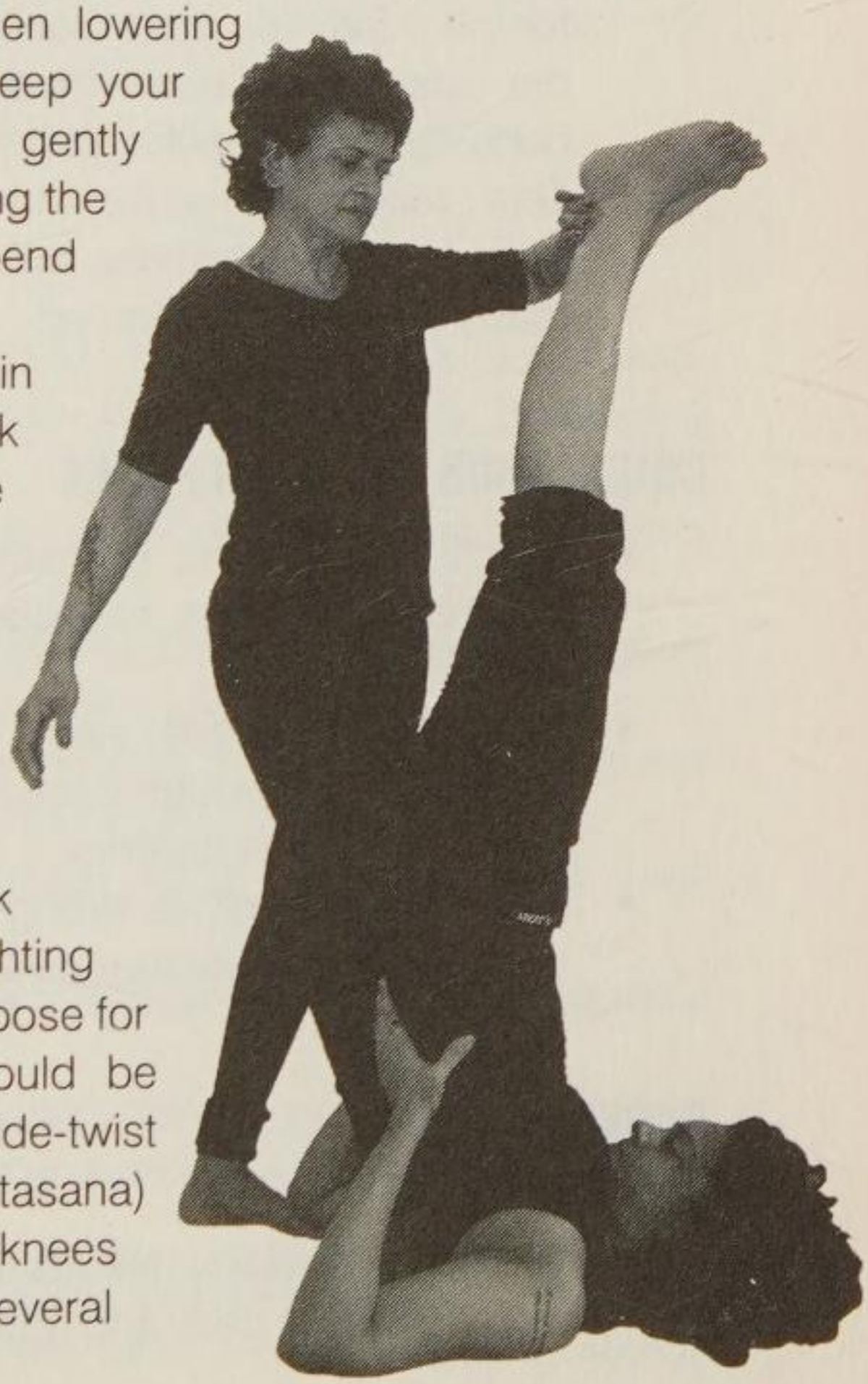
- You can, once the legs are folded, also do other finer and more difficult corrections. Walk the palms down to the shoulder blades. This makes the pose compact by drawing the elbows more deeply in. Often this fine correction is difficult to experience personally. From where you hold the pose you may believe that you have reached the final stage, but having a partner point out the flaws in the plumbline of the pose or having a photo or a video taken of your execution will help you identify the finer corrections you may need to do to grow in the pose.
- The shoulder-stand is one of the poses you should learn to hold as long as the headstand. So try increasing the duration of the final pose. It is one of the most complete poses in the asana tableau and worth working on. Over several months, even years, you may learn to increase the duration to five minutes. The inverted psychic union pose may be held for as long as ten minutes without discomfort.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- There has to be a constant call to enter the pose elegantly, with the arms alongside the body, till the hips rise up.
- There must be a constant reminder to students that they

must resist the temptation to rest the weight of the hips/ body on their hands. Even advanced practitioners often do this in the middle of a long hold, so as to rest their back muscles. Some may do it subconsciously. It is best to build back strength, slowly, so as to prevent this indulgence.

- As the instructor, you need to check and correct jerky movements during the pose, both at the points of entry and exit. Giving instructions step-by-step so the entire group moves in tandem will help eliminate such problems. One way of doing this is as follows: While bringing the student down from the pose, state, 'Now gently begin to lower your back, coming down one vertebra at a time.' You could also urge the student to 'bring the upper back, mid back, lower back and then the hips down.' You could give a separate set of instructions when lowering the legs, such as, 'Keep your shoulders down, then gently lower both legs, keeping the legs straight. Do not bend the knees.'
- Always ensure that in poses where the back is strained, you give 'break poses'(see the chapter titled 'Intermediary Poses' for some examples). This is to relieve the contraction that the muscles on the back experience when fighting gravity. An ideal break pose for the shoulder-stand would be a gentle abdominal side-twist pose (jathara parivartasana) while lying back, with knees folded. There are several



versions of this. Or else, it could be something simple as instructing the students to press the lower back curve into the mat, then to press the chin down between collar bones. This relieves the back at the two spots where it is strained the most in the shoulder-stand.

- If the student is really flexible, hold her lightly at the legs when she is in the final pose. Then turn sideways, till one foot can reach into the upper back of the student. Pressing your ankle bone to lift the student's upper back can often rectify a slump and deepen the pose. But again this is a delicate and refined correction and must not be casually attempted.
- This mode of correction however is better than holding the legs and yanking at the ankles, as most of us are wont to do. The latter can be dangerous if the neck is not prepared for the depth you are initiating. If this move is initiated then the hips of the student must also be aligned. This can be done if you lean, so the student's hips are against your knee. This prepares the student for the depth required. If there is resistance from the hips, you should know the student is not ready for this correction yet.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The shoulder-stand prepares you for the headstand by making your insides, especially your heart, get used to anti-gravity pressure.
- A well-held shoulder-stand makes the next pose in the sequence, the plough pose (halasana) easier by preparing the neck for the challenge.
- As the back becomes strong with the shoulder-stand, sitting up straight in meditative poses becomes easier.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The shoulder-stand relieves tension by releasing contracted muscles at the neck and upper back.

- It also relieves stress by deepening the breath (which becomes very shallow when we are stressed).
- As a result, the shoulder-stand relieves stress-related backache and headache.
- It is soothing for those suffering from hyper-anxiety.
- It is used to rectify emotional lows, such as depression.
- It is one of the major asanas used to control anger.

PSYCHIC

- The shoulder-stand impacts the throat centre, vishuddhi chakra, linked to self-expression.
- It is here where the rajasic temperament – the action-oriented personality – finds relief and creative outlet.
- The shoulder-stand encourages people to reach out spiritually and become life-transformers.
- It has a purifying effect on the mind-body complex.

PHYSICAL

- The shoulder-stand gives a complete body workout, employing all the muscle groups in the body, revitalising and healing it.
- It is soothing, like all other inversions are, since blood flows to the brain.
- The shoulder-stand strengthens and tones the neck region, making it powerful, flexible and strong.
- It also tones the spine, making it very strong due to the resistance the muscles feel against gravity.
- The shoulder-stand helps tone the legs, and heal varicose veins.
- Equally, it tones the pelvic muscles, thus preventing a case of uterus prolapse.
- It tones the urogenital system; thus, it can help treat infertility and other problems of the reproductive system in the case of both genders.
- The shoulder-stand improves posture.
- Since all the organs in the torso are also hanging upside

down, resisting gravity, those parts which have been denied blood supply for a long time get rejuvenated. This keeps the body, brain and face youthful.

- The anti-gravity effect helps relieve haemorrhoids, piles, hernia and ulcers.
- It also fights most chronic ailments of the gut, again due to the anti-gravity impact. Consequently, it improves nutrient absorption.
- It cures constipation, which is seen by yoga as the major culprit in all chronic ailments.
- It impacts the lungs, decongesting them. It prevents chronic episodes of respiratory problems, and can help fight asthma.
- It is used as treatment for diabetes.
- The shoulder-stand may be used as a form of therapy for insomniacs.
- If the shoulder-stand is practised regularly, the thymus becomes super-efficient, making immunity strong.
- The shoulder-stand's impact on the thyroid accelerates the metabolism, and this leads to a positive ripple effect in other systems as well. The pose helps treat hypothyroidism. The pressure on the parathyroid (also at the throat) helps maintain tissue health, helping one repair faster and develop strong bones.
- The shoulder-stand is a powerful detox pose and ideal when trying to recover from a severe illness – though in that condition it must be learnt more gently and in a phased manner.

ADVANCED VARIATION

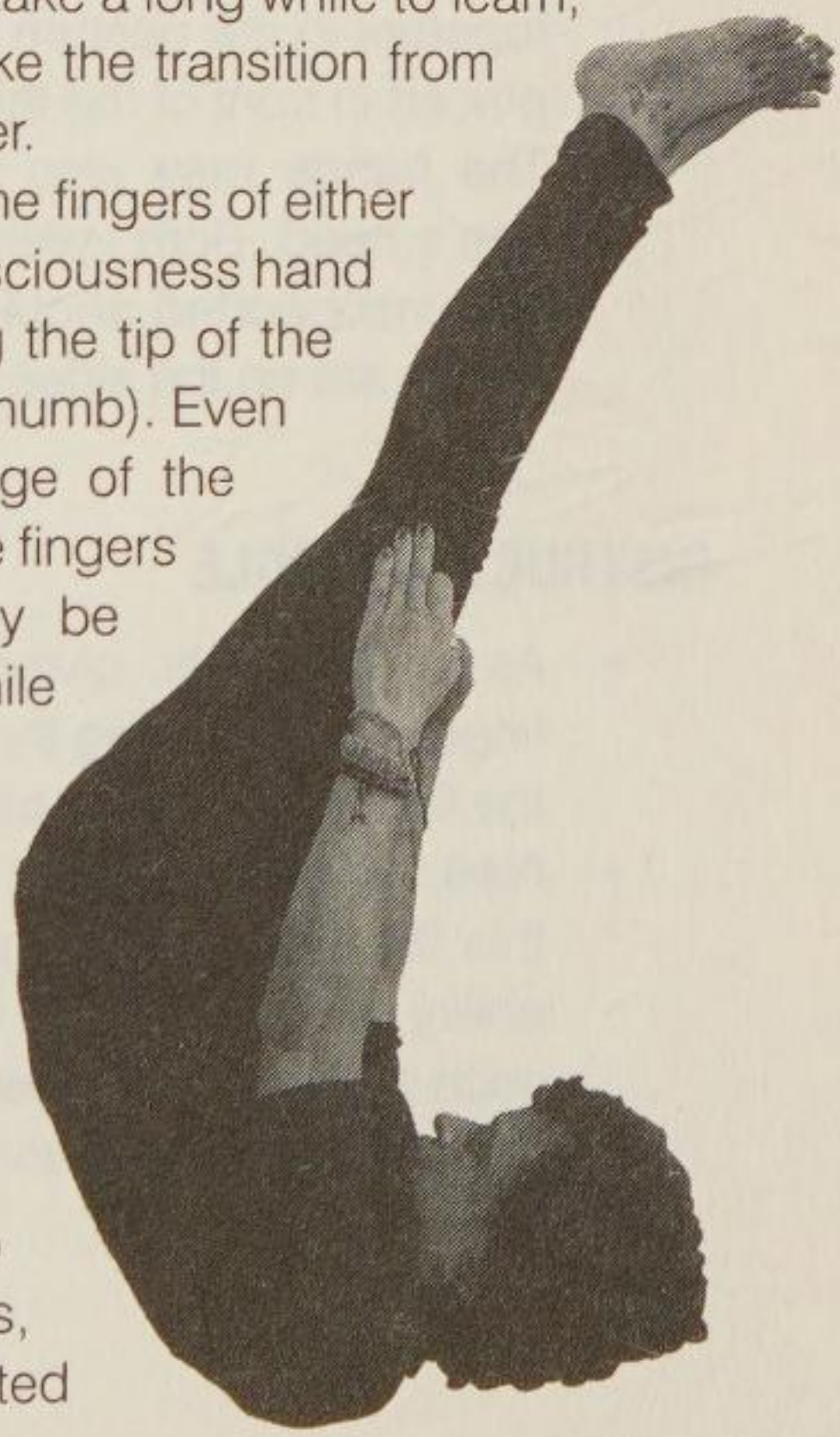
NIRLAMBA SARVANGASANA (UNSUPPORTED SHOULDER-STAND)

Though in principle similar muscle groups are involved, this pose it is rather tough, since it involves a balancing act. Till the subtle

muscle fibres (fachsia) in your body get used to it, you may find it difficult and wobbly. The unsupported shoulder-stand is referred in the yoga community as the candle pose most commonly. Once comfort is achieved in this pose, it feels rather soothing since it relieves the tensions lodged along the neck and upper back.

METHOD

- Start off with a relatively easy entry into the pose, by hanging the legs low, as in the inverted psychic union pose. This creates a broad base for you, with the shoulders giving you a lot of support.
- Release the hands which were supporting the waist, then, raise one hand up, to hold it along the body. Then, if the balance is steady, release the other hand, to hold it similarly along the body. The hands are only along the body and do not touch it. This stage may take a long while to learn, and trying it often helps make the transition from attempt to achievement faster.
- If confident, you may place the fingers of either hand in the chin mudra (consciousness hand gesture, created by bringing the tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb). Even after achieving the first stage of the pose, this part of bringing the fingers together in the mudra may be difficult and may take a while before it becomes a natural part of the pose.
- Remain in the pose as long as it is comfortable, breathing normally.
- To exit the pose, place the hands back at the waist or hips, then flat on the mat, to lower the back and the legs, as in the case of the supported shoulder-stand.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the supported shoulder-stand.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The final pose rests completely on the neck, and is sharp and compact. It may, however, take a long while to reach. Most beginners are happy to settle into a low, broad-based, unsupported shoulder-stand. But the real pose needs immense flexibility at the neck, and this can come about only with regular practice.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The position of the hands may be shifted to try different variations of the candle pose. The palms may be placed together in the gesture of prayer (pranam or namaste) and placed in front of the thighs.
- The hands may also be placed on the ground behind one's head. Both versions are relaxing and help one hold the unsupported shoulder-stand far longer than when the hands are on the sides of the legs.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As an instructor, giving slight support at the legs with a finger, or by holding the legs, can help the student attempt the first, shaky stage of the pose more easily.
- Also, advising students to keep their legs low, and adjusting this for each, based on the levels of confidence and the ability to balance, will help. Most students cannot gauge such aspects for themselves since balancing poses can be rather disorienting during the first few attempts.

BENEFITS

- The advanced variation is more challenging than the supported shoulder-stand. Thus it adds some vitality to your practice, so there is no sense of boredom.
- It also tones and makes flexible the neck and the upper back region, even more than the supported version.
- The advanced variation asks for immense balancing skills, which in turn is drawn from the cerebellum. It thus activates a primitive part of our nervous system which, incidentally, is also involved with learning and impulse control.

HALASANA

(PLOUGH POSE)

This is an exciting pose simply because it remains a life-long challenge for many people, especially if they have disregarded flexibility as an essential component to their health. Also, this is amongst the few poses that cannot be taken for granted. A practitioner may slip into it easily one day but if she ignores the pose by not practising it regularly, she may lose her grasp over it in less than two weeks.

Also, this could be called a 'thermostat pose'. It establishes whether or not the body is working optimally. Therefore, if the practitioner is constipated, has binged, has had a late night, or is sick or tired, her body will refuse to enjoy the pose – her breath may feel stifled, her feet will refuse to reach the ground comfortably, or her neck may feel stiff.

Yet, if the practitioner proceeds with the pose despite the discomfiture, some of the symptoms ease off. As a result, it is a natural detox pose, and a mandatory asana in one's daily sadhana.

The plough pose is one of the most 'releasing' poses in the asana repertoire, and next only to the forward-bend. Not surprisingly, both demand intense flexibility of the spine.

The plough pose always follows the shoulder-stand and must in turn be followed by the fish pose as a counter-pose to both. Usually one drops into the plough pose directly from the shoulder-stand, though the instructions below are given as a stand-alone piece.

Like all flexibility poses, a warm-up helps one enter the pose with ease. Some people who are stiff – due to physical activities that challenge the legs like running or walking or swimming – may

take a while to reach the final pose. But with regular practice this is one pose that always offers itself as a gift.

METHOD

- Lie flat on your back. The palms should be beside the body.
- Press down the palms to hoist the hips up in the air.
- Lift the palms to hold hips lightly.
- Inhale. Exhaling, drop the right leg down as much as you can to touch the ground. If you are a beginner and are unable to touch the ground, do not push too hard.
- Inhaling, lift the right leg back up. Then exhaling, drop the left leg down. Repeat twice for each leg. This part of the pose is tougher than a double leg drop and helps you acquire a sense of balance and lose the fear of toppling to the side, which a lot of newcomers nurse.
- After this, exhale, to drop both legs down. Maintain the position of the hands at the waist, if you are a beginner. The hand position helps by giving you a sense of balance. Also, you may apply light pressure at the hips. Most beginners move their hips down or backwards and thus lose control over the pose. Keeping the hands at the waist helps maintain the pressure against gravity, which drags the hips down if one is unaware.
- If both feet reach down that is ideal, in which case, maintain the pose for a few seconds. If the feet do not reach, do not struggle. Hang with the feet off the ground. If you can hold this position comfortably, you will find that surprisingly the feet will reach downwards with time. Often, I have seen this happen when the student stops struggling and grappling with the body to reach the final pose.
- If your breath is relaxed, you may even stay with the feet off the ground. Sometimes it can relax the body (which otherwise contracts and refuses you entry into a tough pose) and reach you into the pose.
- Initially do not hold the pose for a long duration. Later, increase the time allotted for the final pose to a minute and make it progressively longer.

- To exit the pose, place the palms flat on the ground once more, arms parallel to each other.
- Then lift the feet off the ground.
- Inhale. Exhaling, roll the hips down, and bring the back gently back on the mat, one vertebra at a time.
- Once the hips are on the ground, drop both legs straight out in front.
- To release any contraction at the back, hug both knees to the chest with the hands. Press them down, drawing the knees ahead. This relaxes the back. Then lie back in the corpse pose till your breath returns to normal.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

This pose is to be avoided by those with any kind of spinal problem, high blood pressure, hernia, or those suffering from a weak neck.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Once you reach the final pose, curl the toes in to maintain the pose firmly. This releases the tension along the back of the legs. Often if the stretch is intense, the legs will timidly lift off, and move you away from the pose.
- Most people try to ease the tension at the legs by bending the knees. Try to avoid this, since it will stymie what the pose is trying to do to your body and mind in terms of release. Keep pushing the knees back to ensure the legs remain straight.
- Watch the breath. It may not be deep, but most people hold their breath or breathe erratically in this pose. Becoming aware of the breath will help make it calmer. This will in turn soften away the contracted, tense state of muscles all around and reach you faster into the pose.
- If you cannot reach the final pose, it is recommended that you hang the legs over the ground, as long as is comfortable. It may take a few weeks longer to reach the final stage of the pose, but it is better than struggling with the body and

gaining ground one week then losing it all the next; this is likely to happen if you enter the pose forcefully, when your body is not yet ready for it.

- Once you gain confidence in the pose, it is suggested that you place the hands on the mat in the final position. Keeping the palms flat on the mat, and arms parallel, helps one open up the upper back too. Often this part is very difficult for those with a stiff upper back, or a stiff spine.
- Most people also keep the legs apart loosely. Ideally the legs should be together as much as is possible.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

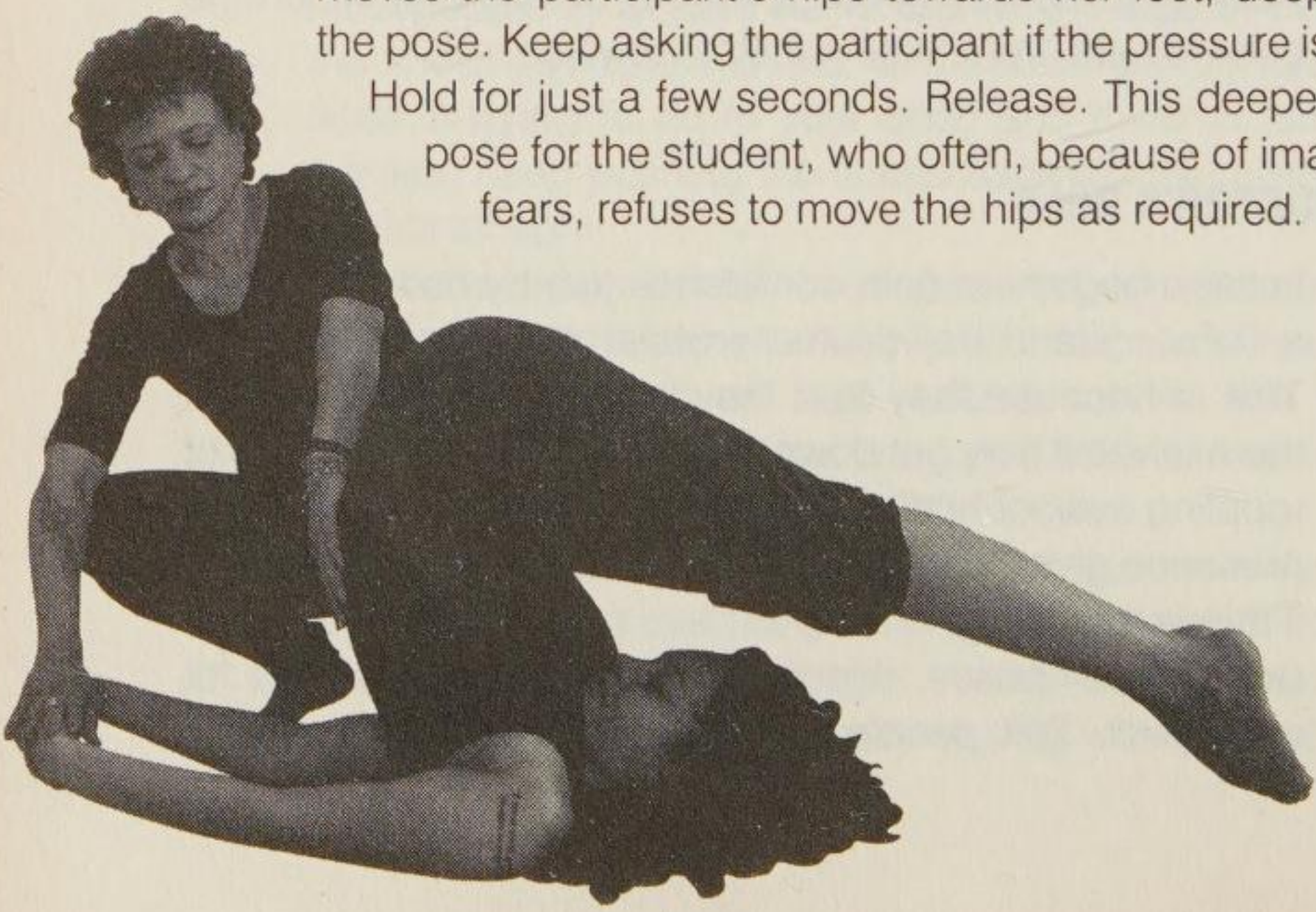
- Walking the feet back away from the head extends the legs even further. This can be rather extreme and may be attempted only by those who can hold the final pose comfortably for long.
- Walking the feet close to the head leads to a similar intense extension at the hips and back. This also calls for immense flexibility at these joints. And the breath is most challenged at this point, so care has to be taken that only advanced students attempt this.
- Attempt to constantly lengthen the duration for which the pose is held, from three minutes upwards.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Initially, beginners gain confidence just by having you, as a trainer, stand beside them while attempting the pose. This is because they fear they will be unable to unravel themselves if they get down. There are also other fears – of toppling over, or hurtling backwards or to the side. So your presence gives beginners confidence that help is at hand if things go wrong.
- Unlike other poses, this one must be treated with a lot of respect. Stiff people should not rush into it, because

it can contract the muscles at the neck and upper back, sometimes due to psychological fears.

- The one-legged leg drop should always be done with a group (for warm-up) and regularly with beginners, because it helps them gain confidence.
- Corrections must be constantly suggested. Most beginners will slacken at the knees; the longer they hold the pose, the more slackening you will see. This will happen even with advanced students. They need to be reminded to keep the legs straight.
- Constant suggestions and reminders towards focusing and relaxing the breath is also very crucial.
- The following is an intense correction, and may be attempted on those who volunteer for it, after having regularly worked on the basic pose. On reaching the final position, let the participant interlock the fingers, and place them on the mat behind the head, with the arms also stretched out. If the arms reach down, then you can be confident that the correction will not discomfit the participant. If the hands remain stiff and off the ground, the correction may be too intense, and is avoidable. If the arms aren't stiff, hold the participant gently down, while placing another palm at the mid back, to gently push it in the direction of the legs or the feet. This moves the participant's hips towards her feet, deepening the pose. Keep asking the participant if the pressure is right. Hold for just a few seconds. Release. This deepens the pose for the student, who often, because of imagined fears, refuses to move the hips as required.



CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The plough pose makes the neck supple and strong, so it can withstand the pressure of the headstand (for beginners), and prepare the neck for advanced poses like the scorpion.
- The plough pose releases the spine from the contraction that can follow a headstand.
- It opens up the legs for seated stretches like the seated forward-bend.
- The nape of the neck – which is psychosomatically a primary fear centre – is worked, removing inbuilt apprehensions that the body has for certain poses that challenge co-ordination skills.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The plough pose has a mood elevating impact.
- It stimulates the mind, yet calms it.
- It grounds one, leading to a sense of calm.
- It also reduces anger and irritability in those who learn to hold the pose with ease.
- It irons away fatigue and lethargy.

PSYCHIC

- The plough pose has an impact on the vishuddhi chakra.
- It puts pressure on the manipura chakra.

PHYSICAL

- The plough pose helps relieve constipation. It also relieves indigestion and flatulence.
- It is therapeutic in the case of asthma, diabetes, urogenital problems, especially for women.
- It tones the digestive tract.
- It also tones the liver, especially after jaundice.
- The plough pose tones the spinal nerves.

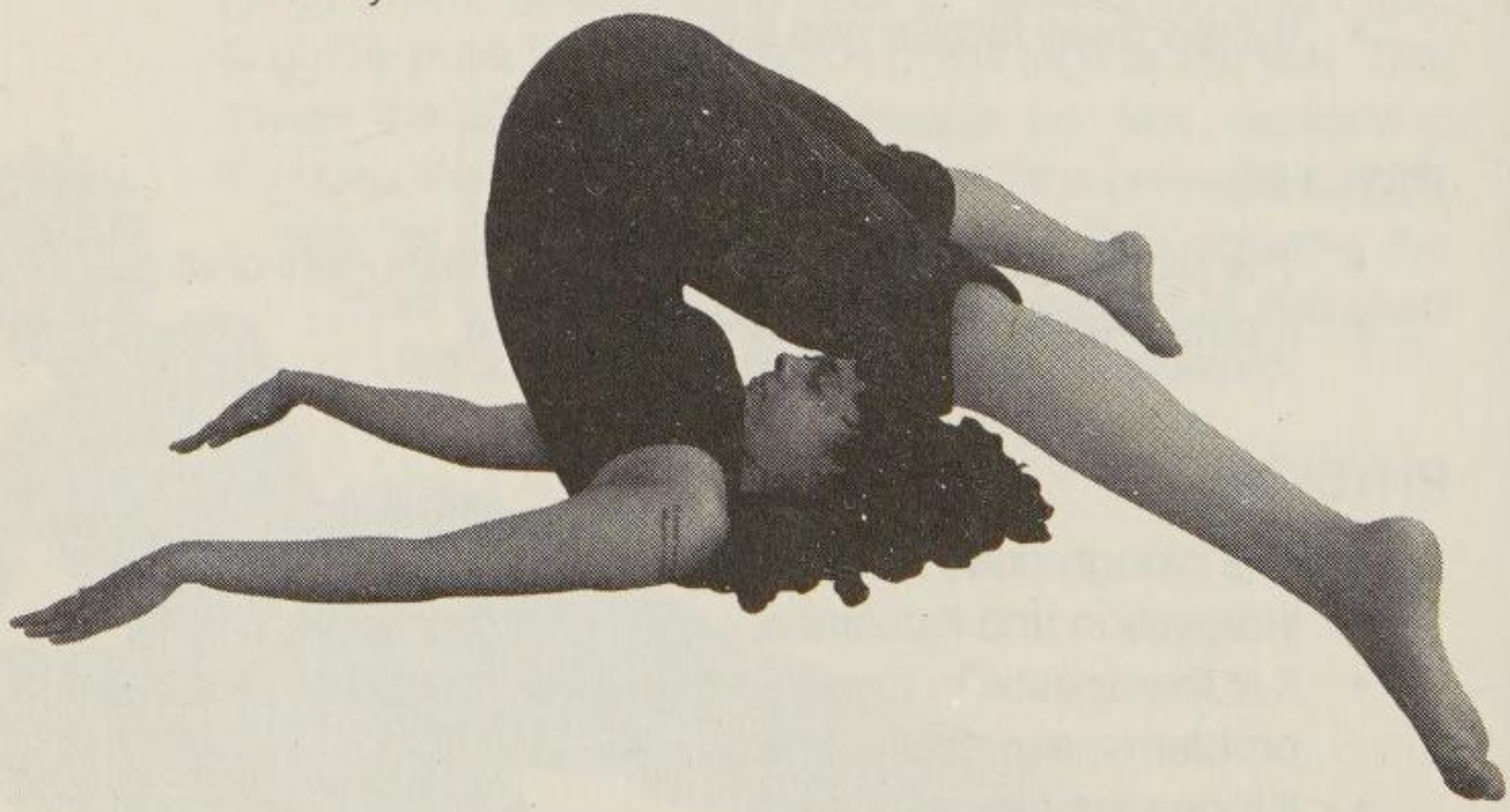
- It shapes the legs and hips region.
- It hikes metabolism.
- The plough pose strengthens immunity.
- It sweetens the voice, as do other poses which squeeze or increase pressure at the neck.

ADVANCED VARIATION

SUPTA KONASANA (LYING ANGLE POSE)

METHOD

- Follow the instructions listed above for the plough pose.
- Spread the legs, still keeping the hands at the waist.
- Once you have stretched either leg on each side to the maximum, tuck the toes in to hold the legs in place.
- Release the hands to take them between the legs, holding up the palms together in a gesture of prayer (namaste). Then hold the pose for as long as is comfortable, breathing normally.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the plough pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Those who are new to the pose will often find that the legs lift off. Maintaining balance is important initially.
- Tuck the toes in, to ensure that the legs remain straight. This will also help keep the legs on the ground, preventing them from lifting off abruptly.
- This pose is easier on the breath than the basic asana, since the legs remain spread out. So you can learn to hold this longer than even the basic plough pose.
- The arms will begin to slacken after a while, so you need to ensure they remain aloft instead of resting at the hips. This will help tone them.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, you merely need to suggest the fine corrections listed for the basic plough pose. The advanced pose is easy to reach and is often very comfortable, even for beginners if they are flexible. It gives them a high since it looks exotic, yet is not extremely demanding.

BENEFITS

- The benefits are similar to those mentioned for the basic pose, but the lying angle pose can improve leg and neck flexibility.
- Additionally, it tones the arms more than the basic pose can.

MATSYASANA

(FISH POSE)

The pose has several stories linked to it. One harks back to an avatar of Lord Vishnu (Matsyavatar) that saved the world from drowning by morphing into a fish with a horn. The other story refers to Sage Matysendranath who secretly overheard Lord Shiva initiate his wife and first disciple Parvati into the secrets of yoga. Both stories indicate the importance of this pose which is, in all practices, one of the most complete body and mind workouts.

Interestingly, while other poses either stimulate or ground you, this is one pose which does both. It also harmonises all the three ayurvedic doshas – vata , pitta and kapha.

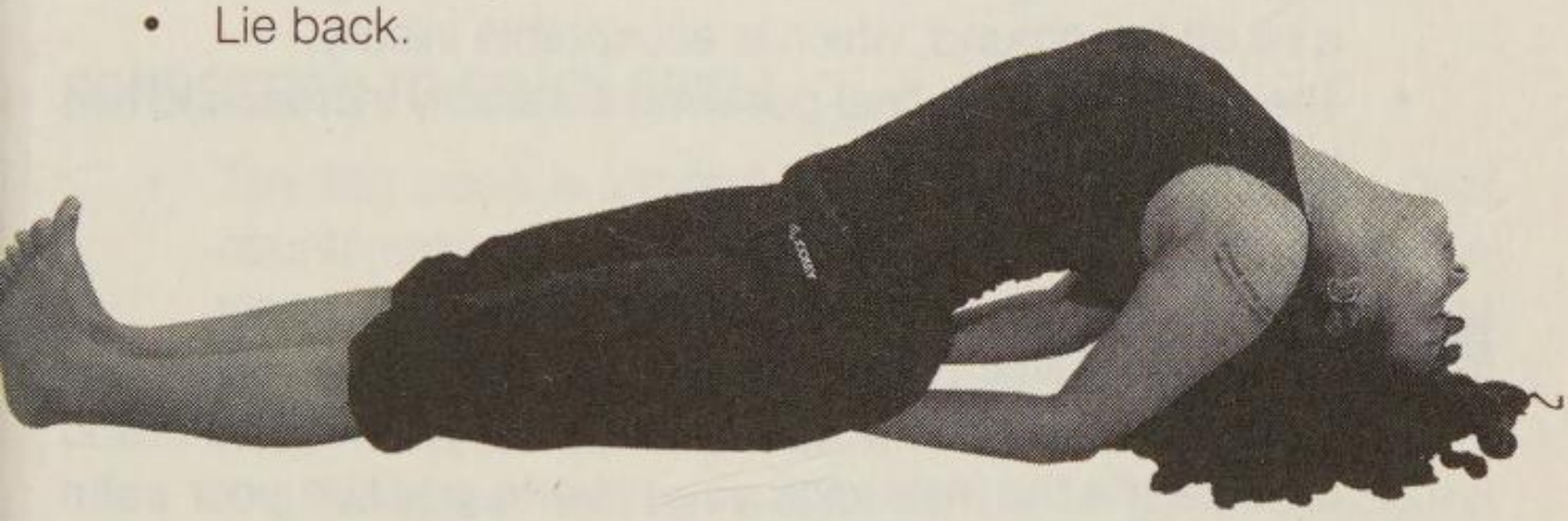
It is the best and most effective counter-pose to the inversions, because it gives a reverse stretch to the neck.

METHOD

- Lie on your back.
- Place your palms under the hips or back, so they are flat on the ground and the thumbs are touching each other.
- Bring the elbows inwards, so that the forearms are close or touching each other.
- Keep the legs pushed into the ground.
- Inhale, to raise the head up to look at your toes.
- Exhale, gently arching the back, to drop the head back, so you can rest the crown on the ground. Beginners may lack the neck and upper back flexibility required for this, so may go up to the back of the head. To reach the final pose,

with the crown on ground, may take a few weeks till neck flexibility is gained through regular practice.

- Hold or push the chest up, breathing normally. Keep this in place for a few seconds. Then inhale, lift up your head to look at the toes.
- Exhale to lower the upper back on the ground, gently and slowly.
- Push the chin in between the collar bones to relieve any tension.
- Push the lower back's curve into the mat to relieve the tension along that area.
- Lie back.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those who have vertigo must avoid the fish pose.
- Though it is assists with long-term cure overall, those who have migraine may react negatively to this pose. The fish pose therefore must be avoided during those periods when a migraine attack is expected. The same holds true for women suffering from premenstrual tension.
- Though it strengthens the neck in the long run, those with neck problems must learn the fish pose only after the problem is under control. The same holds true for those with lower back issues.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The upper back must be tense and held up on its own. This will release the pressure at the lower back. This calls for a subtle shift of awareness, knowing that if one part of the body is tense, the other will relax.

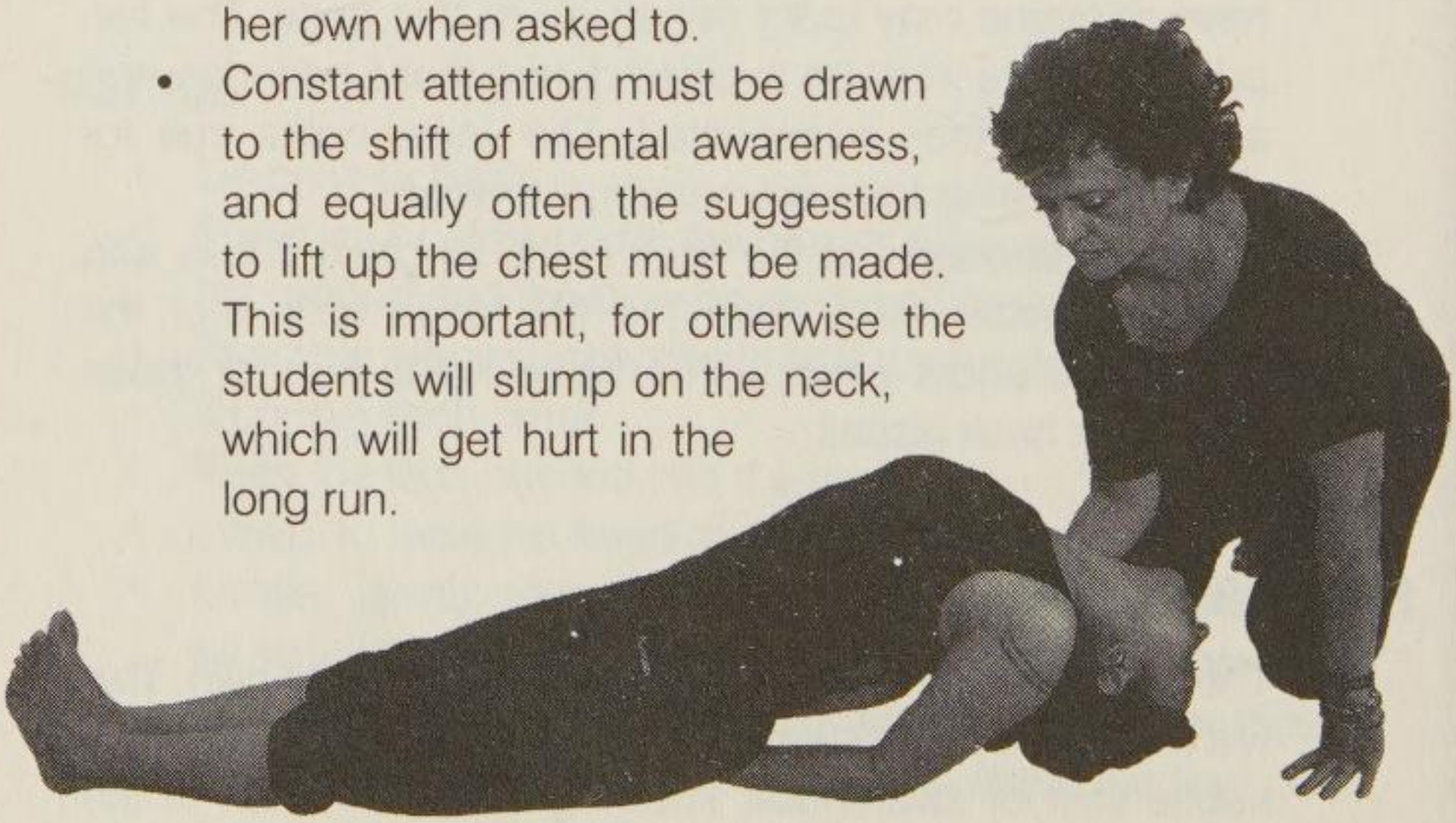
- One's awareness must shift between the elbows, crown and the upper back. The chest must be constantly lifted and pushed up to ensure that the tension along the upper back is sustained.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- You may attempt the pose in the lotus position. For this, the hands however will be along the body, elbows bent (if flexible), with the fingers holding the big toes of the opposite legs (since they are crossed). One knee is likely to be raised a bit off the ground, which is acceptable initially.
- The duration in the final pose must steadily increase to two to three minutes.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- The corrections this pose asks for are rather intricate and delicate. As the instructor, you have to position your palm under the participant's upper back, at the shoulder blades, to support her, and show her how the chest may be held. The pressure of the palm must be firm but gentle. The participant will lift the upper back on her own when asked to.
- Constant attention must be drawn to the shift of mental awareness, and equally often the suggestion to lift up the chest must be made. This is important, for otherwise the students will slump on the neck, which will get hurt in the long run.



- Most students will also lift up the legs at the knees subconsciously to ease the pressure at the lower back. This must be brought to attention, with the suggestion to push the legs into the mat, or to straighten the knees.
- Most students will also point the toes ahead. This is not required. The workout is essentially along the back and there is no call for strain elsewhere. Also, when held for long the fish pose can be rather relaxing; so deliberately relaxing other parts of the body not involved in the pose will intensify the feeling of repose.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The fish pose is viewed by all yoga schools as the best counter-pose to the inversions, especially the shoulder-stand and the plough pose which scrunch the neck. The fish pose gives a reverse stretch which relieves tensions acquired in the earlier poses.
- The fish pose must be held for half the length of the plough pose and the shoulder-stand added together. This is important if the fish pose is used as a counter-pose to the former two.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The fish pose is calming and restful.
- It is also stimulating and exciting, livening the mind and mood.
- It removes fatigue and lethargy from the body and mind.
- It removes anxiety and stress by releasing tension from the upper back and lower back.

PSYCHIC

- The fish pose works on three chakras all at once – anahata, manipura and vishuddhi.

PHYSICAL

- The fish pose strengthens the heart and improves overall blood circulation.
- It helps treat respiratory problems. But for this, the fish pose must be taught in a phased manner, since those who have respiratory problems usually feel dizzy in the early stages.
- The fish pose is therapeutic in the case of spinal problems, if done in a phased manner, under expert guidance.
- Upper back pressure strengthens the entire neck and the shoulder region, preventing episodes of neck pain, cervical spondylosis or spondylitis.
- It tones the kidneys.
- The fish pose deals with the problems of the urogenital system, especially if done with the lotus pose, due to the pressure at the pelvic region.
- If done in the lotus pose, it can also help relieve piles.
- The fish pose helps treat diabetes, due to the pressure it exerts at the abdomen.
- It treats constipation.
- It helps treat most chronic digestive problems due to the pressure at the abdomen.
- The fish pose boosts immunity, due to its massaging pressure on the thymus gland.
- It massages the thyroid and parathyroid at the throat, helping with energy levels, metabolism, and tissue repair and health.
- The fish pose tones the arms.
- It rectifies postural defects.
- It keeps the delicate neck and facial skin taut due to a backward stretch to the face and neck. Thus the fish pose keeps one looking younger, preventing sagging and removing fat pouches by the chin and neck.
- If the skull cleansing practice (kapalabhati) is done during the final pose, it aids weight loss.
- If a cooling pranayama or sheetali (breathing exercise) is done at the stage of the final pose, it improves the voice. The pressure at the throat sweetens the voice in any case.

ADVANCED VARIATION

MATSYASANA, LEG LIFTING VARIATION (ADVANCED FISH POSE)

METHOD

- Lie on the back, with the hands along the body.
- Inhale, lifting your head to look at your toes.
- Exhale, drop your crown behind, arching from the neck.
- Continue normal breathing throughout. Once you have positioned the head properly, raise both the hands, palms together in a namaste position and point them towards the ceiling.
- Follow this up by raising both legs off the ground, pointing the toes ahead. They should be about 45 degrees off the ground. Hold this for 10 to 15 seconds, dropping the legs and hands back to the original position.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the basic fish pose.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The hand position may be changed, again to stimulate daily practice. With the palms together in the namaste pose, the arms may be held behind the head or at the chest.
- The leg position may be shifted to different angles, once more to extend the degree of challenge.

CONNECTION TO THE OTHER POSES

- This variation may be attempted to break the monotony of daily practice. However the duration of the asana may not be very much due to the pressure exerted from the legs. Ideally, this variation may be practised after the classic fish pose, to extend its duration.

BENEFITS

- The benefits are as listed for the basic pose, though this variation tones the hips, legs and arms more effectively.

PASCHIMOTTANASANA

(WESTWARD-FACING FORWARD-BEND)

For several serious yoga practitioners this is the most defining pose amongst the classic ones. Many would confess to having a more intense relationship with this, than the other exotic poses. In fact, the ancient texts say that when a practitioner reaches this pose in depth, she will 'become free from diseases'. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Swami Swatmarama lists this as the best form of abs exercise. It tones the digestive tract, makes the belly flat, and clears the pathways for the life force. No wonder, it can give a tremendous high as well as a sense of calmness when approached with respect, love and surrender.

METHOD

- Sit with both legs stretched out, feet lightly touching inside.
- Lengthen from the hips, so the back remains straight. This stage of the pose is called the rod pose (dandasana). Palms are flat on the ground beside the hip, pointing ahead.
- Inhale, raise both the hands towards the ceiling. Extend yourself, so the stretch moves along the spine to the hips and reaches into your fingers.
- Exhale, lower the hands to the legs, reaching them where you can. Ideally you should be able to reach for your toes, but initially for those who are not flexible, any part of the legs is fine.
- Look ahead if you are extra stiff. Otherwise, drop the head towards the thighs, thinking of reaching the stomach to the thighs first.

- Initially, hold only for a few seconds. Repeat this thrice.
- Later, once your flexibility increases and allows you to be comfortable in the pose, you may slowly increase the duration of the final pose to a minute or more.
- Continue normal breathing throughout.
- Then release the hands to raise them up again, before dropping them back at the starting position.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

All forward-bends must be avoided by those with lower back problems.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Avoid bouncing up and down. Often those who think they are very stiff tend to do this, assuming it will reach them deeper into the pose. Actually bouncing contracts the muscles involved, making the body stiff and resistant.
- Learn to relax in the pose instead of struggling with it. Surprisingly, you will find that the pose deepens, as if on its own, when you assume this attitude of letting go.
- Check the breath. Most people hold their breath or breathe erratically, due to the pressure on the abdomen and chest. Learning to ease the breath deliberately will draw you into the pose faster.
- Move the torso and head down only on every exhalation. Engaging the breath in this way softens the effort and helps you move deeper. The exhalation also creates space between the torso and the thighs by squeezing in the stomach.
- Turn the toes in of both feet; this will help release the tension

along the back of the legs. This may feel painful initially, but if you do this even for a short time, you will find that you are able to open up the legs and hips region faster.

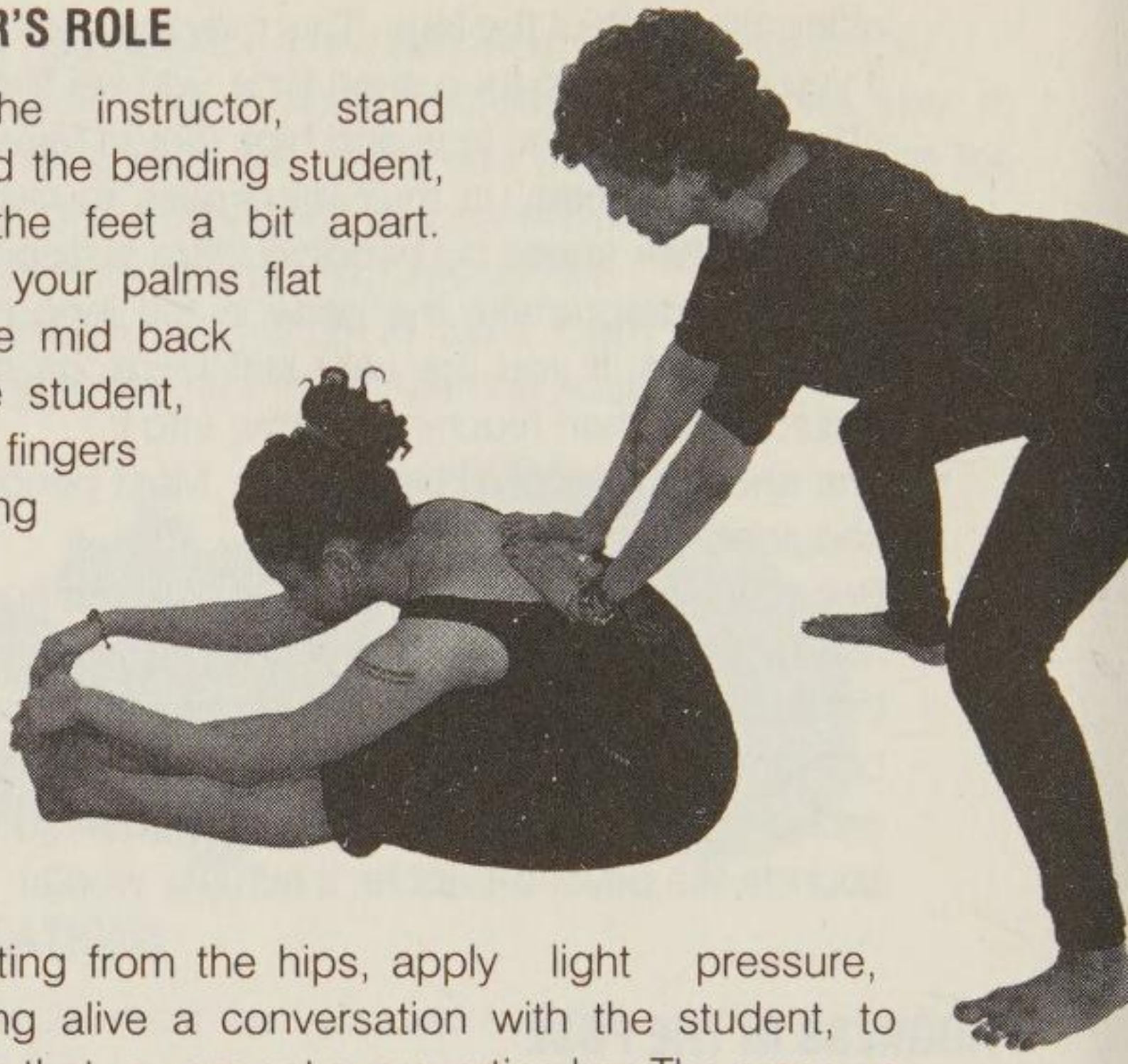
- Though beginners, in their eagerness to reach the pose, often lift their knees by bending them subconsciously, this will only compromise the pose in the long run. Push the knees down. If you are very stiff focus on staying in the pose, rather than reaching deeper into it.
- The shoulders should be relaxed. Most people make their shoulders and their hands tense.
- Becoming aware of pain spots and focusing on them will mentally calm the mind in the pose. If you try to reach into the pose by ignoring pain spots, there will be resistance from both the mind and the body. This is an asana of surrender and can be reached only when you let go. Though this sounds like psycho-babble, it actually works!

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Initially you could try reaching your forehead to the thighs.
- Later, you could try reaching the chest and stomach to the thighs.
- Then, once the flexibility has improved, you may move the forehead up to the knees, or to the shins.
- Later, you can also drop your chin to the legs. This clearly calls for greater extension all over, especially at the neck, and means deepening the pose considerably. When this stage is reached, the pose actually becomes rather soothing and relaxing.
- The actual pose involves the hands as well; you may hold the big toe with either index finger. Then work the hands closer to the legs. Drop the elbows, so they are on the ground, close beside the legs. This can extend the stretch by 200 per cent and can only be achieved by very dedicated practitioners.
- Extending the duration in the pose to three minutes or more over several weeks can also be an exciting way to grow in the pose.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, stand behind the bending student, with the feet a bit apart. Place your palms flat on the mid back of the student, your fingers pointing up.



- Squatting from the hips, apply light pressure, keeping alive a conversation with the student, to ensure that you are not overexerting her. The pressure must be consistent and firm. There should be no jerky pressure.
- The duration of the pressure should also be co-ordinated with the student's consent. Some students enjoy the release, while others may find it painful. This is a fine line and must be executed with care and with the complete involvement of the student.
- Usually students can deepen the pose rather well with this assistance and some can hold on for a while. But this is not true for all students, some of whom may want you to release the pressure as soon as they dip more into the pose. This must be synchronised always with each student. The instructor must not overextend the student.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose usually follows inversions and is used to release the contraction of the neck caused by asanas like the

headstand. It relaxes the upper back and releases the spine from the impact of inversions.

- It precedes the backbends which are counter-poses for forward-bends.
- It is usually placed mid-way in your asana practice to ground and calm you, before moving into the more stimulating practices such as the backbends and arm balancers.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- Because of the pressure exerted by this pose on the adrenal glands of the lower back, the westward-facing forward-bend calms hyper-anxiety, and removes tension and stress when held for a long time.
- It helps one cool down and removes the negative effects of anger and irritability.
- It is a very grounding pose.

PSYCHIC

- This pose works on the second chakra, swadhistana.

PHYSICAL

- All the major systems of the body, except the nervous system, are in the abdomen. The squeeze at the abdomen tones all the major glands and organs there. Not surprisingly, all the major bodily systems are positively impacted by this pose. (This is true of all forward-bends, whether they are standing or seated.)
- This pose strengthens and tones the kidneys and liver.
- It is used to treat digestive tract problems, such as indigestion, flatulence, dyspepsia and constipation.
- It tones the pelvic region, and engages the urogenital system, healing and controlling problems of that region.
- This pose extends the spine, tones the nerves, and prevents spinal problems.

- It helps heal a stiff neck, though those with spinal issues must learn such poses in a phased manner, under expert guidance.
- The westward-facing forward-bend boosts respiration and is used to control chronic respiratory problems.
- It is used to treat diabetes.
- It is therapeutic if one is suffering from knee problems. It helps make the legs and hips strong, and takes the load off delicate joints.
- The legs and arms become toned with this pose.
- The face glows, since the pose sends a gush of blood to the skin and also works on the master glands (the big axis of pituitary, pineal and hypothalamus) at the head positively. The hormonal yo-yos which cause ageing or skin eruptions are controlled.
- This pose helps treat insomnia.

ADVANCED VARIATION

KURMASANA (TORTOISE POSE)

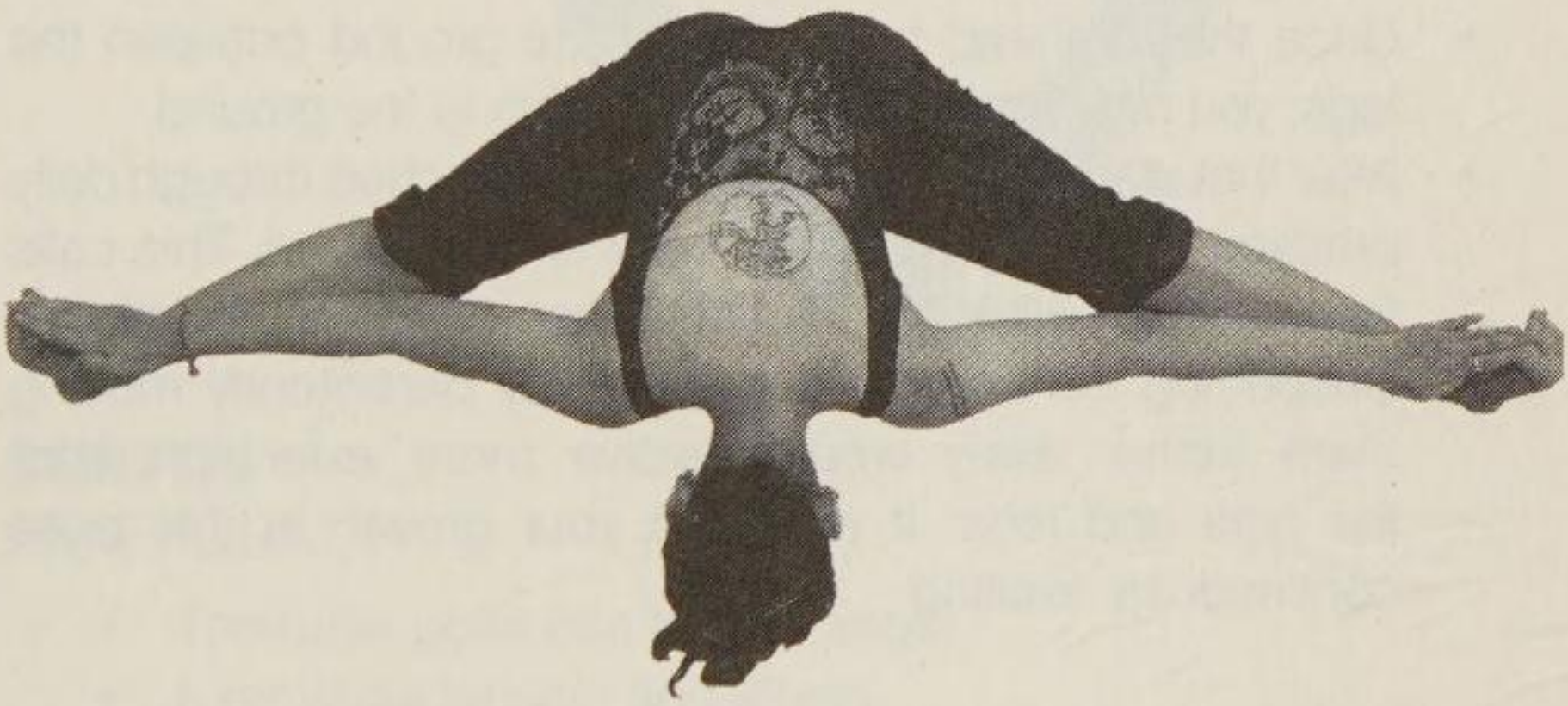
This is a very advanced pose and regarded as a highly spiritual one. It is said to help still the mind, draw it in just as a tortoise draws its limbs in. It may only be attempted by someone who has mastered the westward-facing forward-bend. But even they may find this pose challenging and difficult.

The tortoise pose comes with a long learning curve, and slow, steady and daily practice is necessary. But as in the case of all poses of surrender, you must learn to give in to the pose rather than struggle with it.

METHOD

- Sit in the rod pose, as explained above. Then split the legs as widely as you can, with comfort.
- Push the back of the knees down, making the legs even straighter.

- Turn the toes of both feet inwards. This opens the legs even further.
- Sit up from the base of the spine. This opens the spine for the depth this pose needs.
- Inhale, reaching the hands overhead. Extend the hands high. This will further open up the spine.
- Exhale, dropping the hands down between the legs.
- Place the palms down first, to gauge if you are hurting.
- Slowly (and each of these stages may be taken over several weeks) move the palms ahead, bending forward so the lower arms are now touching the ground. Then lower the elbows.
- Next, you may attempt to move the forehead to the ground.
- Stay at this level for several weeks. This stage of the pose is called the earth-touching pose (bhumanasana).

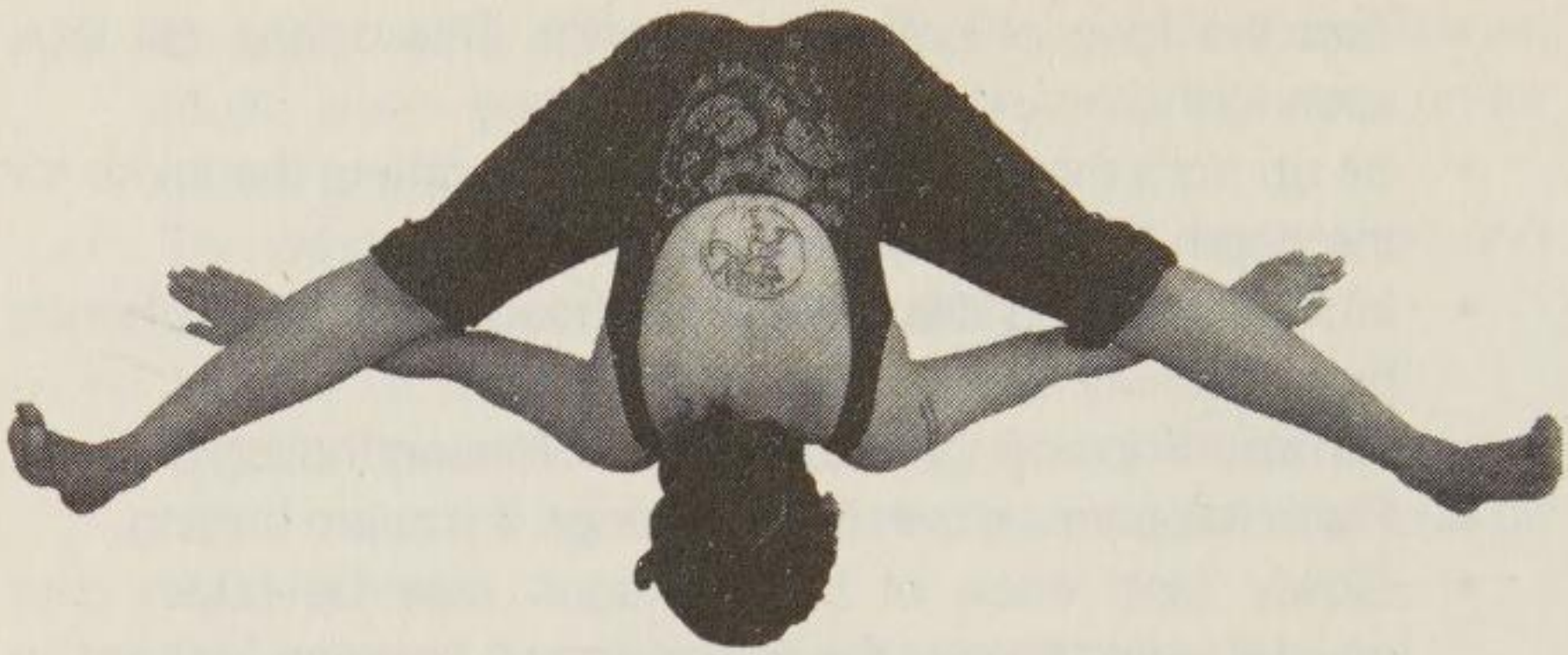


CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the westward-facing forward-bend.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- After the earth-touching pose has been mastered, you may bend the legs at the knees, and walk the hands under them, extending the arms completely. Then drop the knees over the arms. This looks like a tortoise, with four legs.

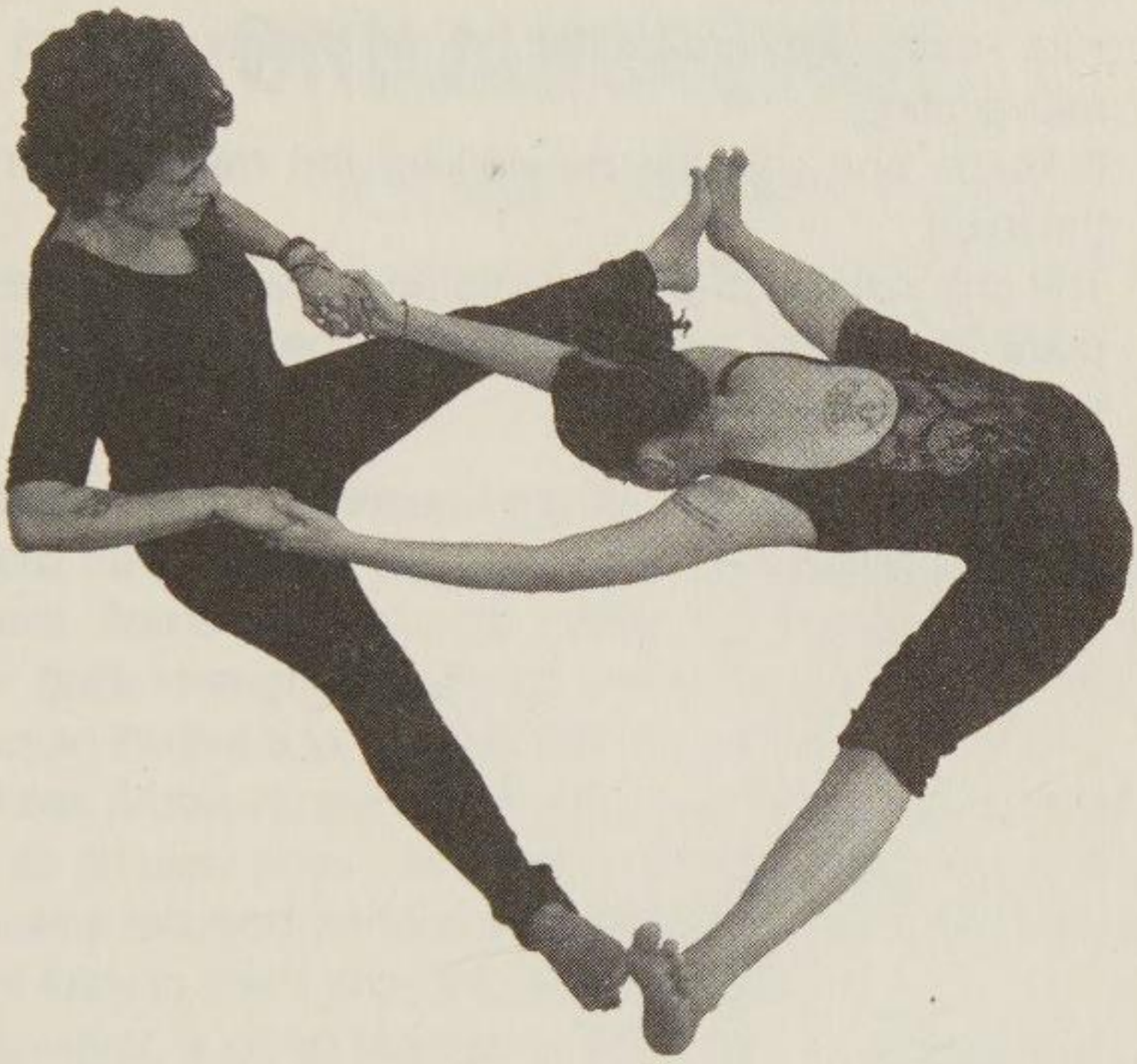


- This calls for immense flexibility from the hips, the entire spine and the legs and each stage may require daily practice over several weeks. A beginner to the pose must not overextend herself.
- Initially hold this pose only as long as is comfortable. Then, extend the duration steadily.
- Once the forehead has touched the ground between the legs, you may attempt to drop the chin to the ground.
- After that stage has been comfortably reached through daily practice, you may drop the chest to the ground. This calls for extreme flexibility at the saddle region, spine and hips.
- Deepening the spread of the legs by persistently moving them further away would involve more extension from the hips and legs. It will keep your growth in this pose continuously exciting.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, you may sit with your legs spread out in front of the student. Place either foot at either ankle of your student. Hold the hands of the student, drawing her gently towards you. This will open the spine initially.
- Sit with the legs apart, and the feet at the ankles of the student. Spread your legs, so a simultaneous pressure is applied at the student's legs, spreading them further. This is a great way to widen the legs of an already flexible student. It must not be attempted with someone very stiff, however.

Also, the pressure must be gentle, with care to coordinate every move with the student. This will ensure that you do not strain her.



BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The turtle pose can deflate anger.
- It removes tension and stress.
- It is a great way to establish impulse control.
- It is said to still the mind and deepen focus and concentration.

PSYCHIC

- The turtle pose works on all the chakras, helping to harmonize them.
- It is a spiritually uplifting pose.

PHYSICAL

- The turtle pose offers a complete body workout, and tones the spinal nerves.
- Like other forward-bends, it is deeply healing and rejuvenating.
- It keeps one younger by working the major systems in the torso.
- The chin extension pushes into an important acupressure point at the jaw, which is said to be youth-giving and health-sustaining.

BHUJANGASANA

(COBRA POSE)

This is a tricky and a deceptive pose. Most people, and even yoga schools, have different ways of reaching it and recommend varying degrees. Some go quite high, compromising the development of upper back strength. Others do not insist on correction because this could involve a lot of effort from the student.

These problems are further compounded by the fact that this is seen as an easy pose – in terms of giving instructions and having the basics followed without disorientation. As a result, this pose is taught early in one's entry into yoga practice.

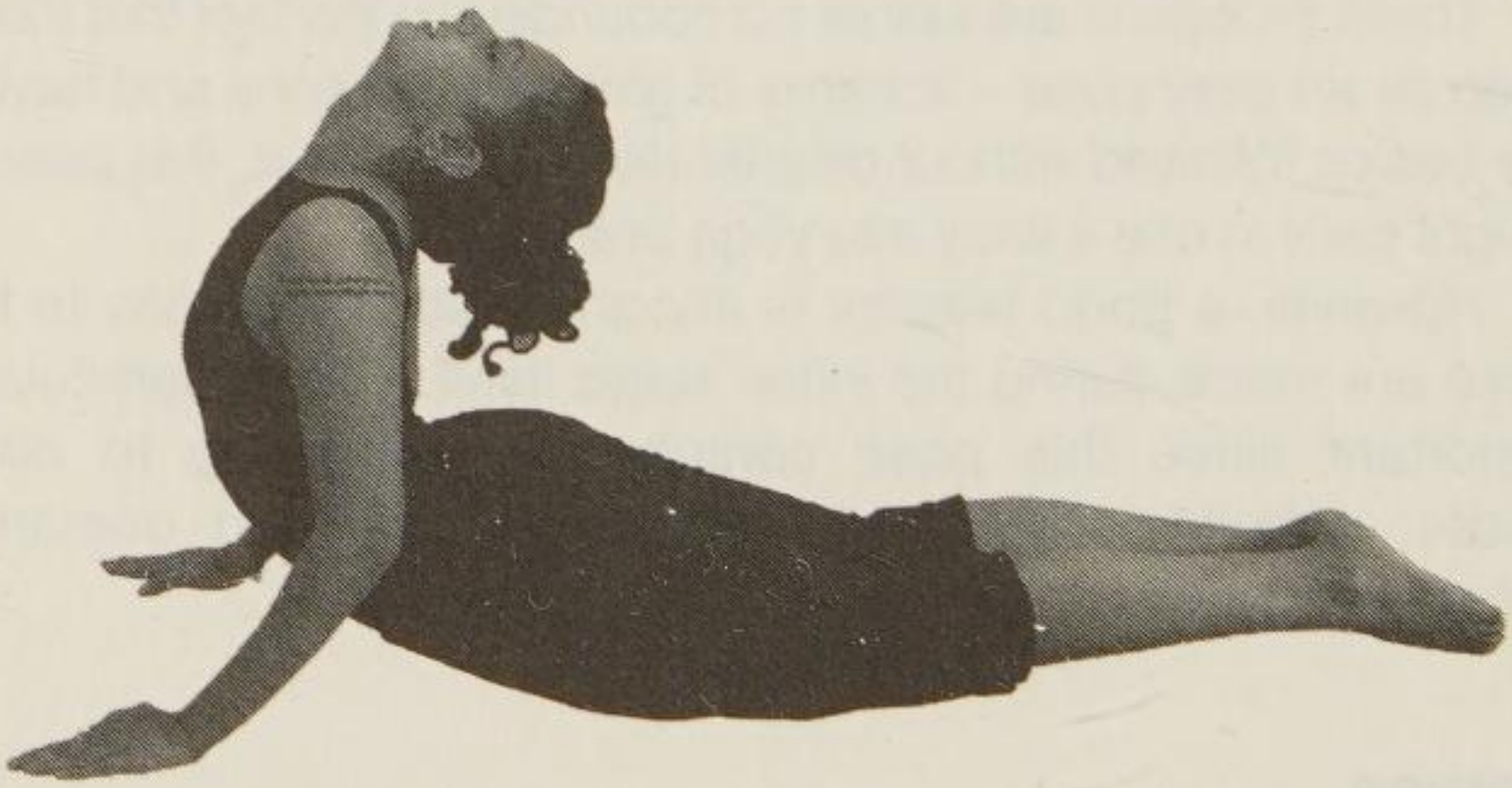
However, a good teacher is important so corrections to the pose are made during the initial stage itself. This is particularly important since this pose contributes enormously to other poses; it builds stamina, increases flexibility and demands breath support.

METHOD

- Lie on your stomach.
- Place the palms flat on the ground, under either shoulder.
- Elbows should be pointed up, close to the body.
- Legs should ideally be together. (This may be difficult for those with bow-legs, or very obese people, or for those with knee or lower back problems.)
- The feet should lightly touch from inside.
- The back of the feet are on the mat. Some people do this pose with their toes curled in. This is okay for a beginner.

But putting an emphasis on the back of the feet is better since it opens the ankle tendons for advanced meditative postures like the lotus pose.

- Inhale, and lift the chest up, pushing into the palms.
- Tilt the chin up, pushing the chest out.
- Drop the shoulders, continuing to breathe normally while doing these adjustments.
- The stomach may lift off, but the hips must remain on the ground.
- Continue to hold this pose for a few seconds. Repeat thrice. Later you may learn to hold the pose comfortably for half a minute or so.
- To wind up the pose, exhale, dropping the chin back to the starting position. You may rest in the crocodile pose (makarasana), which is explained in the chapter titled 'Intermediary Poses'.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with heart problems need to work on the pose in a phased manner. Though most schools are fearful about teaching this pose to heart patients, a gentler version can be attempted, without too much effort from the shoulders, to help tone the supporting muscles of the chest.
- This pose is best avoided by those with hernia, ulcers or other inflammatory conditions.

FINE CORRECTIONS

There are several fine corrections which must become second-nature to really experience this pose.

- The pelvis must remain on the ground, though the stomach may lift off. If the pelvis is also raised, as happens when people wish to overextend or look pretty, the upper back strength and the toning of the hips and legs get seriously compromised.
- Unless you are overweight or bow-legged, the feet must remain together. Initially those with a very stiff lower back may splay the legs. But with practice and awareness this must be corrected.
- The shoulders bunch up often. Even advanced students may do this, as they become tired. Constantly correcting this will help you develop subtle awareness in the nerves and muscles, and also fine-tune mental stamina.
- The awareness of where the pressure and strength is needed becomes in itself wonderful progress; the strength comes from the base of the hands and the upper back.
- The arms should be straight if the lift is good. Most beginners will flare the elbows to protect the upper back from the load of this pose. This should be constantly corrected.
- The elbows must remain close to the body throughout.
- The chin must jut out.
- The chest should also jut out. Bringing the shoulder blades together helps fine-tune this aspect.
- The wrist, upper back, lower back and hips take the brunt of this pose. Shifting awareness to these body parts will help you relax in the pose.
- Initially do this pose a few times, till you acquire stamina for it. Later try to hold the pose continually for a minute or so to develop real tone and stamina.

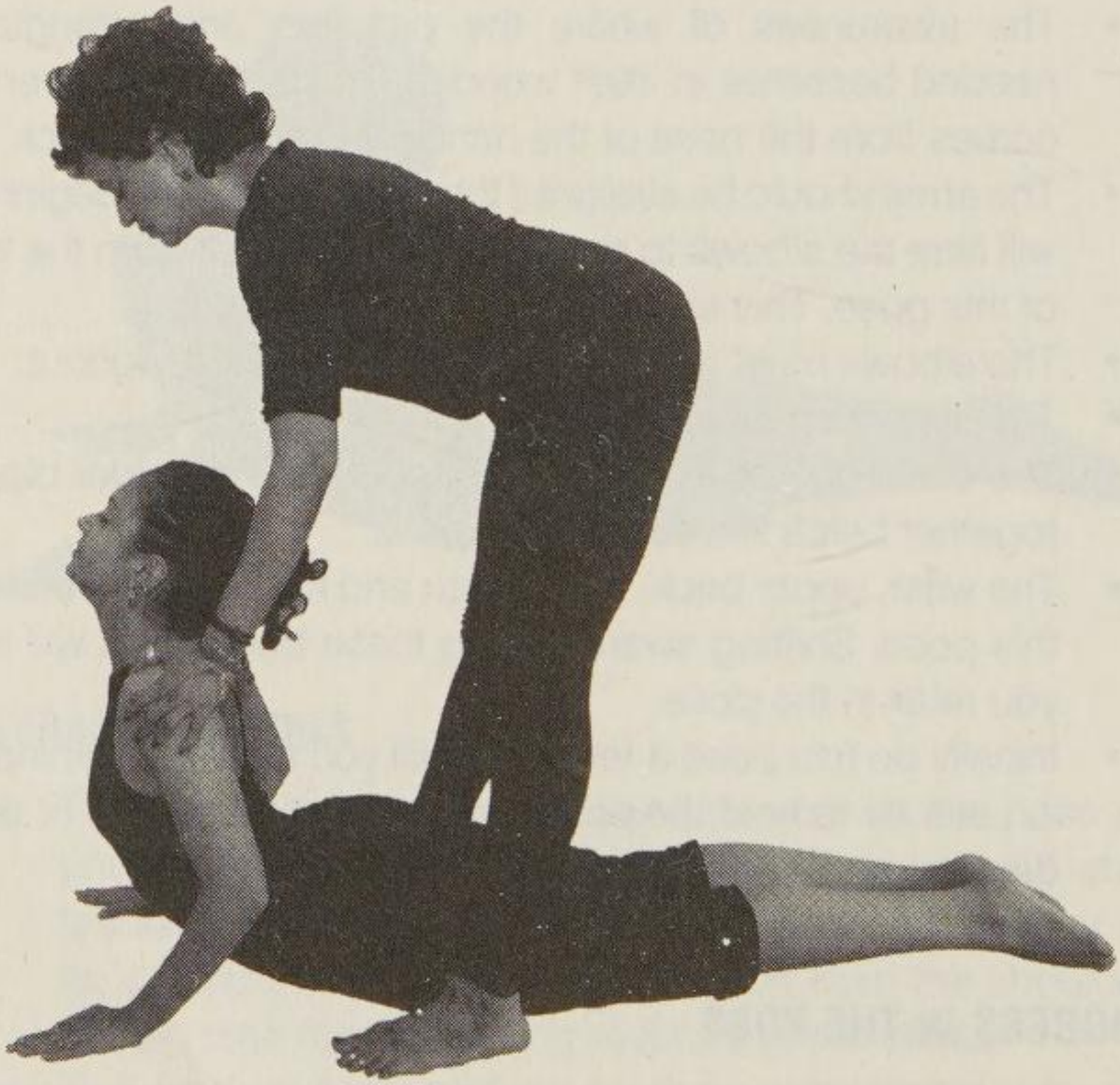
PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The duration of the pose can be progressively increased, to raise the bar.

- The curve at the lower back may be intensified by throwing back the head, as if to reach to the hips.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Urge the student to draw the feet together if they are splayed (provided she is flexible enough to take that correction). You may do this in two ways. One by using your hands to gently draw them together. Or else, you may straddle the student over the legs, and work your ankles together to draw the student's ankles together. In certain cultures this may be seen as intimate and also regarded as offensive. So you need to be aware of the cultural context.
- If the shoulders are bunched up or slumped, straddle the student, so you are facing the back of the student's head, and draw the shoulders back.



- Most students feel extreme pressure in the lower back when they lift up. Therefore, as the instructor, you may straddle the student, as below. Placing either palm at the waist, or placing one palm flat at the lower back may help prevent unnecessary contraction in the lower back. Keeping the lower back and hips engaged through the use of soft pressure and by maintaining a gentle grip will protect the student from muscular contractions. Contracted muscles not only feel sore later on, but they also adversely affect the flow of breath while holding the pose.

- All of the above fine corrections must be continuously repeated if the students hold the pose for a long duration, for there will be a tendency to slacken at the difficult spots.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The strength this pose gives helps you transit to other demanding poses with ease; these include the headstand – which requires shoulder strength, and the crow pose (or kakasana) – which needs strength from the arms, shoulders, upper back and hips.

- This pose also grants flexibility that helps deepen the other backbends, including the locust (salabhasana), and the bow (dhanurasana).
- The perfect wheel depends on being able to shift the weight to the arms. Most students who do the wheel will maintain pressure at the legs and are unable to shift it to the arms; till the arms are strong and flexible enough to straighten in the wheel, the wheel will be held with unnecessary muscular effort and extension. The cobra pose grants one the strength to assume the perfect wheel pose.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The cobra pose makes you calm if held with awareness. It helps fight stress.
- It can help manage anger and anxiety if held with relaxed breathing.
- It is therapeutic for those suffering from depression, as are all backbends.
- It stimulates the mind, like all backbends.
- It fights lethargy and dullness.
- One of the biggest emotional bonuses you get from the regular practice of this pose, when you learn to hold it for a long duration, is mental stamina.
- The cobra pose makes you accepting and loving.

PSYCHIC

- The cobra pose works on several chakras powerfully, including the swadhisthana, manipura, anahata and the vishuddhi chakras.

PHYSICAL

- The cobra pose is therapeutic and prevents lower back problems.

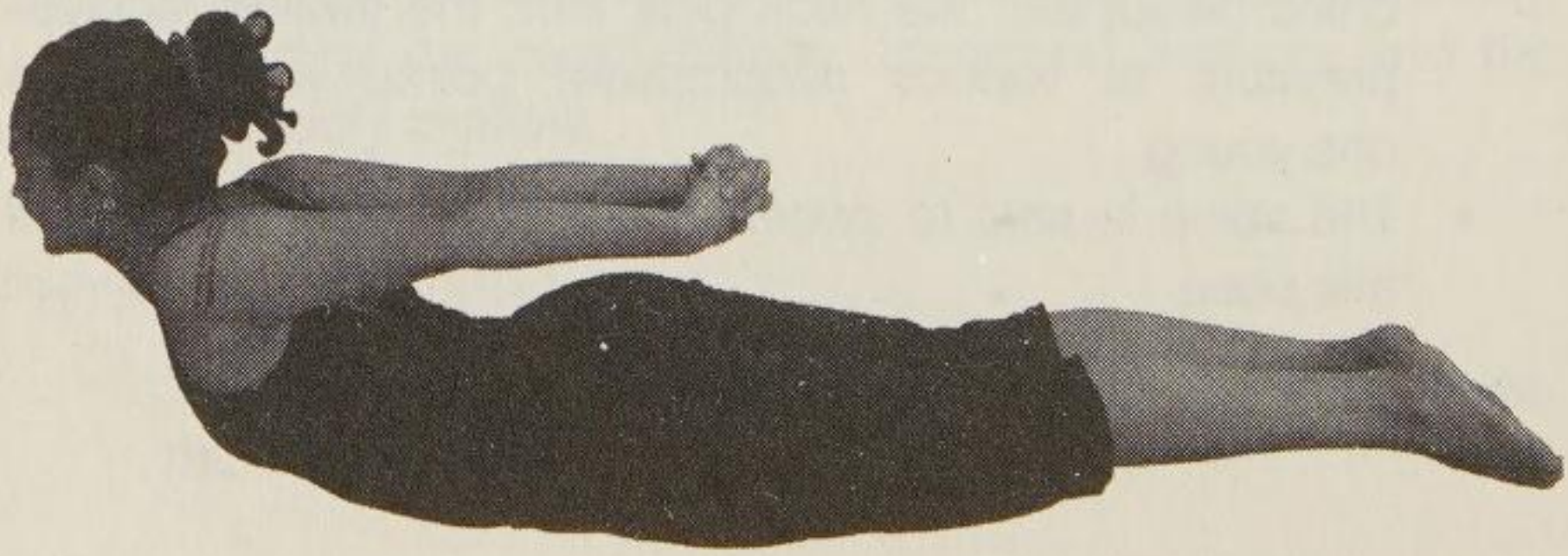
- It is used to tone the back muscles in the case of a slipped disc, so they support the spine better.
- It tones the entire spine, thus affecting the spinal nerves too, which are involved with the automatic functions of our body. This helps restore homeostasis after a period of severe stress.
- Postural alignment and adjustments happen naturally.
- The adrenal glands at the back are massaged, helping us handle stress better.
- The pressure at the thyroid regulates the metabolism.
- The parathyroid squeeze at the throat rejuvenates all the tissues in our body.
- The cobra pose strengthens the immune system due to pressure it puts on the chest where the thymus is located. This is true of all chest-openers.
- All backbends improve breathing considerably by expanding lung capacity and working on the intercostal muscles at the rib cage.
- The urogenital system benefits most from this pose, since it addresses all the major problems that can affect it.
- The kidneys are toned.
- The abdomen is toned, helping one lose weight there.
- The digestive system is under pressure, and thus the entire gut is toned, along with other systems and glands closely associated with it, like the liver and the pancreas. It is therefore a useful pose for diabetics.
- The legs and hips become more shapely.
- The face gets a glow and remains youthful due to the upward drag this pose creates in the facial tissue. Double chins disappear; the neck gets firm; the jawline receives pressure at various acupressure points which keeps one young.
- The voice is said to sweeten with the regular practice of this pose.

ADVANCED VARIATION

SARPASANA (SNAKE POSE)

METHOD

- Lie on your stomach. The chin should rest on the mat.
- Bring the legs together, and feet as well, with the back of the feet flat on the ground.
- Place the hands behind the back to interlock the fingers. Rest them on the hips.
- Inhale. Keeping the hands straight, lift the chest as high as you can, using the back muscles.
- Once this position is firm, lift the hands off the hips as if somebody is holding you up and away from your body. This should be comfortable. If you feel it is uncomfortable, initially, keep the hands lowered at your hips till the back and chest are able to take the load of this pose.
- The chin juts out. The chest is pushed out, as the shoulder blades tuck in.
- Hold this for as long as you can comfortably, with your focus on regulating the breathing and holding up the back muscles.
- To release the pose, exhale, lowering your chin back to the mat.
- Rest in the crocodile pose.
- Repeat thrice initially. After regular practice hold it only once with strength, and for a long duration.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the cobra pose.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The lift of the arms can be constantly improved upon. The higher they go the more strength you gain.
- You can also lift the legs up and off the ground in the final stage for a variation of this pose.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, you need to keep repeating the call to lift the hands up, if it is an advanced group. Usually after every few seconds the students will slacken the hands since the muscles tire. But once the suggestion is loudly repeated most of the students will attempt to follow it. It becomes a group effort and it is rather fantastic to see how even comparatively weaker students in the class go with this flow.
- Holding the hands from behind (this may involve having to straddle over the student, facing the back of her head) to draw them lightly away from the body is recommended for stronger or more flexible students. Others may feel excessive strain with this correction.

BENEFITS

- The benefits are similar to those listed for the cobra pose, with more muscular toning at the chest and upper back.
- The arms also get more toned, since the inner arm muscles are utilised powerfully.
- This pose releases emotional tensions, like all chest opening poses, by working on the anahata chakra.
- It increases the respiratory capacity of those with breathing problems.

ARDHA SALABHASANA

(HALF LOCUST POSE)

Ardha salabhasana or the half locust pose works on the swadhistana or tailbone chakra. The advanced and classic version of this pose, salabhasana or locust, on the other hand, works on the vishuddhi or throat chakra. The simpler of the two poses addresses all that is creative in us while the advanced version helps us express it! Therefore ideally both versions must be made a part of our daily practice, even if it means that the simple pose acts as a warm-up to the classic one.

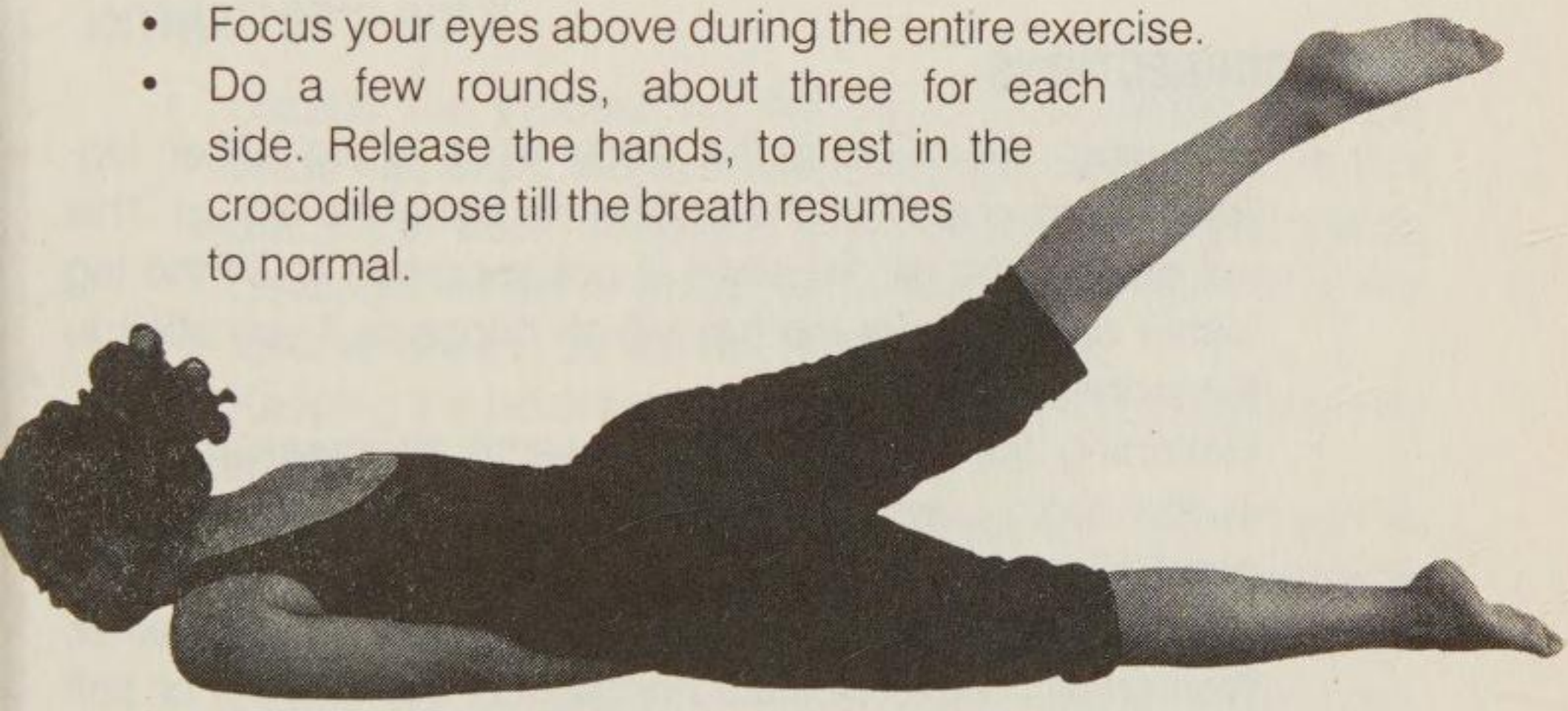
The half-locust pose is one of the most difficult asanas despite its apparent simplicity. Because it presents no apparent challenge in terms of flexibility or balance, practitioners tend to neglect this pose in their daily practice. Also because it is usually recommended three-fourths into one's practice (as with other backbends), one becomes tired while executing it. Most practitioners will confess to holding this pose for barely half a minute or more. However, to trawl the depths of this pose, you need to invest daily and practise it regularly.

It is also worth your while since it is a complete body workout which is also hugely therapeutic.

METHOD

- Lie on your stomach, chin resting on the ground.
- Interlock your hands under your stomach.
- Bring the elbows as close as possible. This is achieved by working the lower arms or forearms close to each other.

- You may have to raise your hips, bunching them up, bending lightly at the knees to work the elbows and lower arms close to each other. An ideal position is where the elbows are not seen when viewed from above.
- Then settle the body back onto the hands.
- Inhale, lifting the right leg high in the air.
- Hold for a few seconds. Exhale, lowering it.
- Inhale, raising the left leg high.
- Exhale, lowering it.
- Focus your eyes above during the entire exercise.
- Do a few rounds, about three for each side. Release the hands, to rest in the crocodile pose till the breath resumes to normal.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Though great for lower back strengthening and healing, this pose should be taught in a phased manner for those with severe or chronic pain.
- While the pose could be used as therapy in the case of heart and blood circulatory conditions, it should be introduced only after four or six weeks of regular sadhana. This is so the body is acclimatized to the pressure the pose creates in the chest. In fact, since the classic position creates deep pressure in the chest, it is avoidable in severe cases. Those with heart problems may keep their hands along their body instead of under it. Heart patients may also lift their chin off the ground since this eases the pressure and intensity of the classic version.

- Those with neck problems may find that the actual muscular effort comes from the neck. Keeping the arms under the body actually propels the leg lift from the upper back (which is weak for those with neck issues). Such students may therefore try the above version with their arms along their body, looking ahead (instead of up) while lifting the chin.
- Those with abdominal distension or gut inflammatory conditions like ulcer or hernia must avoid this pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- You must avoid tilting the body while lifting either leg. Remember to stay on the belly while lifting the leg up. This will prevent the tilt. Initially it is not important to lift the leg higher up, but work the hip, which happens if you stick to the technique.
- Extending the chin works a powerful acupressure point in the region, which aids the anti-ageing process and cures ailments.
- The lower arms and forearms must be close together. Women who have delicate hands may use a towel or soft cushion there to help ease the intense pressure of the pose.
- Pointing the toes ahead or lifting the leg from the heel will engage different muscle groups servicing the leg. This will open up the leg muscles and tone them even more powerfully.
- Though you may bend your legs lightly in the classic locust, you must avoid this in the half locust to ensure that the leg is fully engaged.
- Focusing on the upper back while lifting will ensure that the back is involved in the lift.
- Tighten the hips as you lift up, to work the pelvic region and hips.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- As one progresses, one moves into a confident and light classic locust.
- Holding each leg higher, and for longer, is another way to up the ante.
- Learning to engage the breath in this pose will take you far in the classic locust.

INTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Usually the student will not be able to gauge that the body has tilted. As the instructor, you need to point this out. If the body threatens to tilt, adjust the leg by lightly holding the heel or ankle, so as to position the foot at the spot where the tilt will not happen.
- Keeping the palm flat on the lower back curve is a good way of giving a physical cue to avoid the tilt.
- You may also place your palm under the raised thigh to indicate the lift that is possible. This should however be gentle and is only advisable for the very flexible student.
- Correcting the raised foot may also be required. Oftentimes, students will flop the foot from the ankle. To keep the foot taut and engaged is important in the case of all leg lifts.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose prepares you for the classic locust, explained below. Ideally, it should always precede the classic locust, to open the pelvic region for a higher lift.
- It prepares you for the more difficult backbends, including the scorpion, by engaging awareness and muscular effort at the hips and the back of the legs. Since the neck is made strong and supple, the primary fear in the scorpion, which is lifting the head up from the headstand, is taken care of.
- It is amongst the few poses that challenges the back muscles of the legs and increases one's confidence in the standing poses, if held for long.

- It tones the hips tremendously, easing you into squats and lunges.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This pose removes lethargy. All backbends have that power.
- It is therapeutic in the case of chronic fatigue syndrome.
- The pose fights hyper-reactivity, stress and anxiety, due to the impact it has on the legs and hips (which are believed to lodge the tensions of the daily grind).
- It stimulates the mind and is used to treat depression.
- By removing postural defects, it boosts confidence.

PSYCHIC

- The pose is said to work on the second chakra, swadhistana.

PHYSICAL

- The pose helps control backaches. It strengthens the lower back and may be taught in a phased manner to those with chronic back pain.
- It combats flatulence.
- It prevents constipation.
- It boosts digestion and nutrient absorption.
- It helps control urogenital problems.
- This pose is therapeutic in the case of both blood circulatory and sugar problems. It helps battle high blood pressure (but in this case, the pose must be carried out with the hands in front or beside the body) and diabetes.
- The stretch at the neck impacts the thyroid and parathyroid. The former deals with energy levels, and the latter with tissue health.
- The pressure at the chest also has an impact on the thymus gland, boosting immunity.

- This pose shapes the arms, legs, buttocks and the back of the thighs.

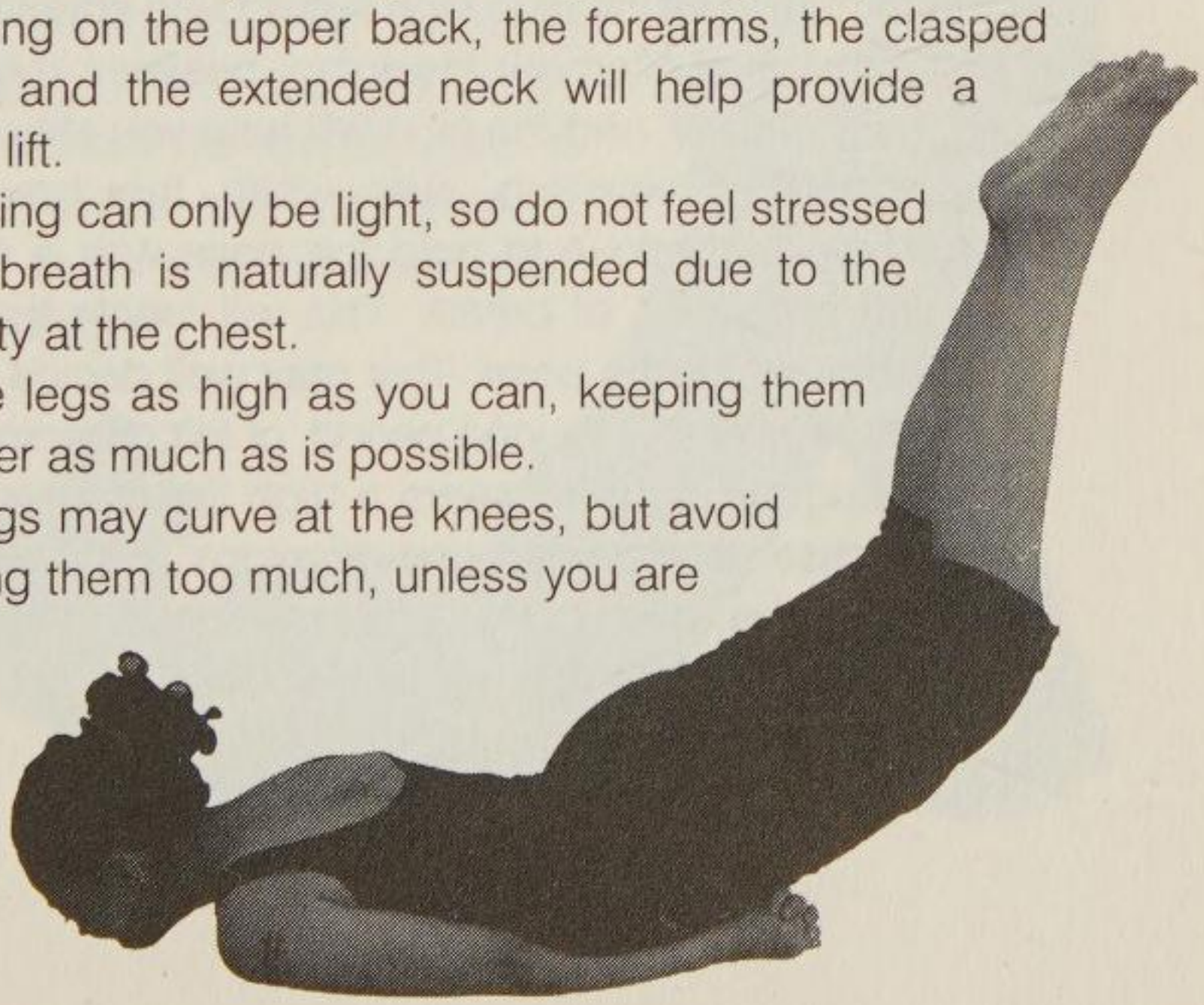
ADVANCED VARIATION

SALABHASANA (LOCUST POSE)

This is a rather advanced pose. Despite its seeming simplicity it will remain a constant challenge for many practitioners, since the depth of the pose can be determined and measured by the height of the leg lift, the ease with which the breath flows in the final position, as well as how long the practitioner is able to hold it. Also, the control with which the lift is executed is one of the most challenging aspects of this pose. This pose is tough even for advanced practitioners which is all the more reason for practising it with dedication.

METHOD

- Clasp the hands under the body and prepare for the pose, as in the case of the half locust.
- Now inhale deeply, raising both legs as high as you can.
- Focusing on the upper back, the forearms, the clasped hands and the extended neck will help provide a higher lift.
- Breathing can only be light, so do not feel stressed if the breath is naturally suspended due to the intensity at the chest.
- Lift the legs as high as you can, keeping them together as much as is possible.
- The legs may curve at the knees, but avoid bending them too much, unless you are



new to the pose – in which case, the bent knees may help lift the legs higher.

- Hold the pose only as long as is possible, with light breathing. Then exhale, to gently lower legs back to the ground.
- You may repeat this thrice, or hold it just once for a long duration and with control.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the half locust pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

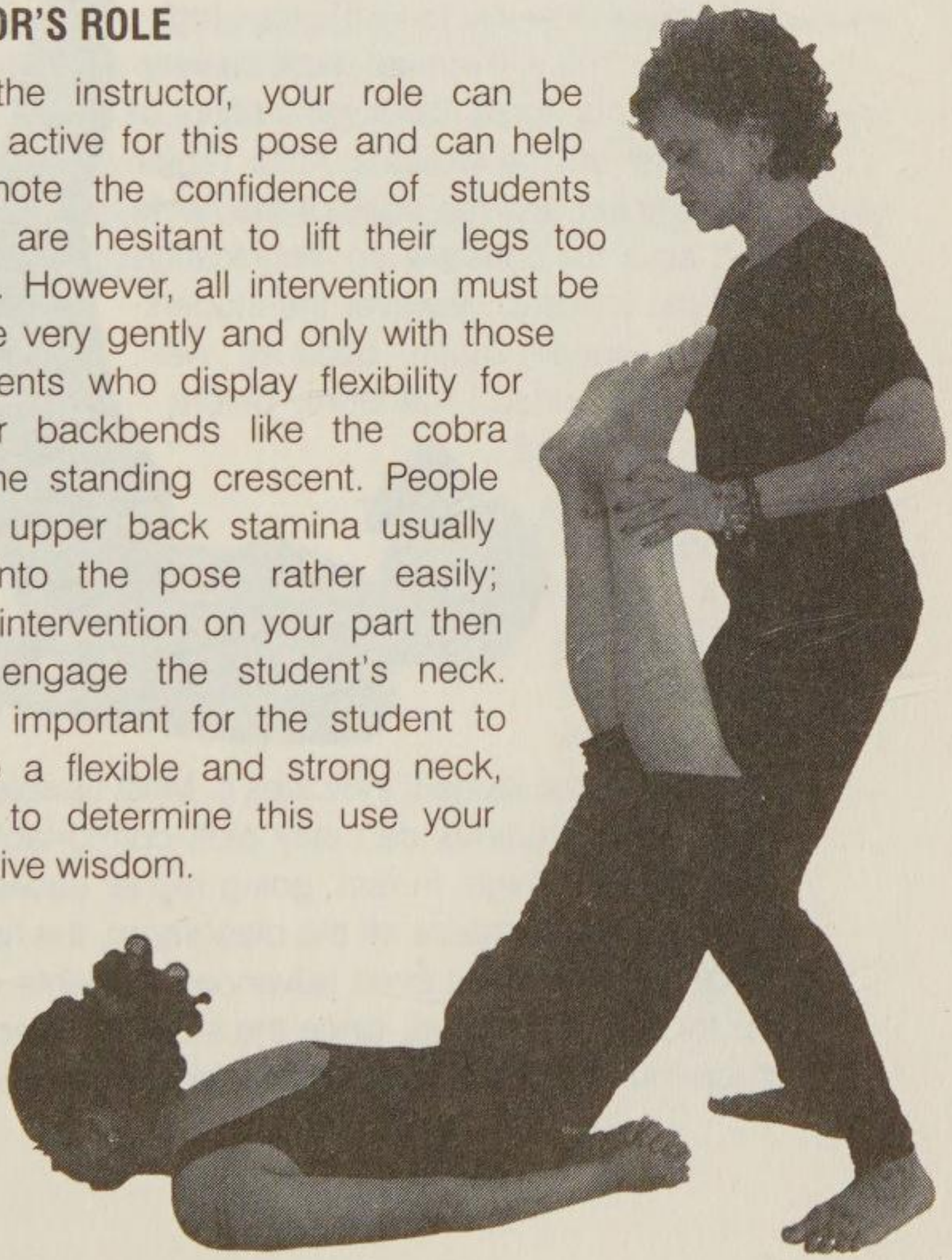
- Moving the hands inwards, so the elbows are hidden, ensures that a fulcrum is created from which the body will lift the legs up.
- You may have to lift the hips high to work your hands inwards.
- Extending the chin, after periods of rest, will engage the upper back.
- Pushing the hands into the floor (or the mat) and bunching the hips to lift the legs high helps build stamina.
- Learning to alternate the focus between the upper back, the forearms, and the hips will help you stay up longer.
- Instead of worrying over when the breath becomes strained, continue to hold the pose with a soft inhalation and exhalation of breath. This will create the right mental lightness for the pose. This may well decide if the pose is held well and for a long period, or left drooping with strain.
- Though everybody wants a high leg lift, it is important to practise regularly, so one develops in strength. Also, you may have to keep the legs together and straight instead of flaring them lightly, as happens in the case of the advanced lift.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

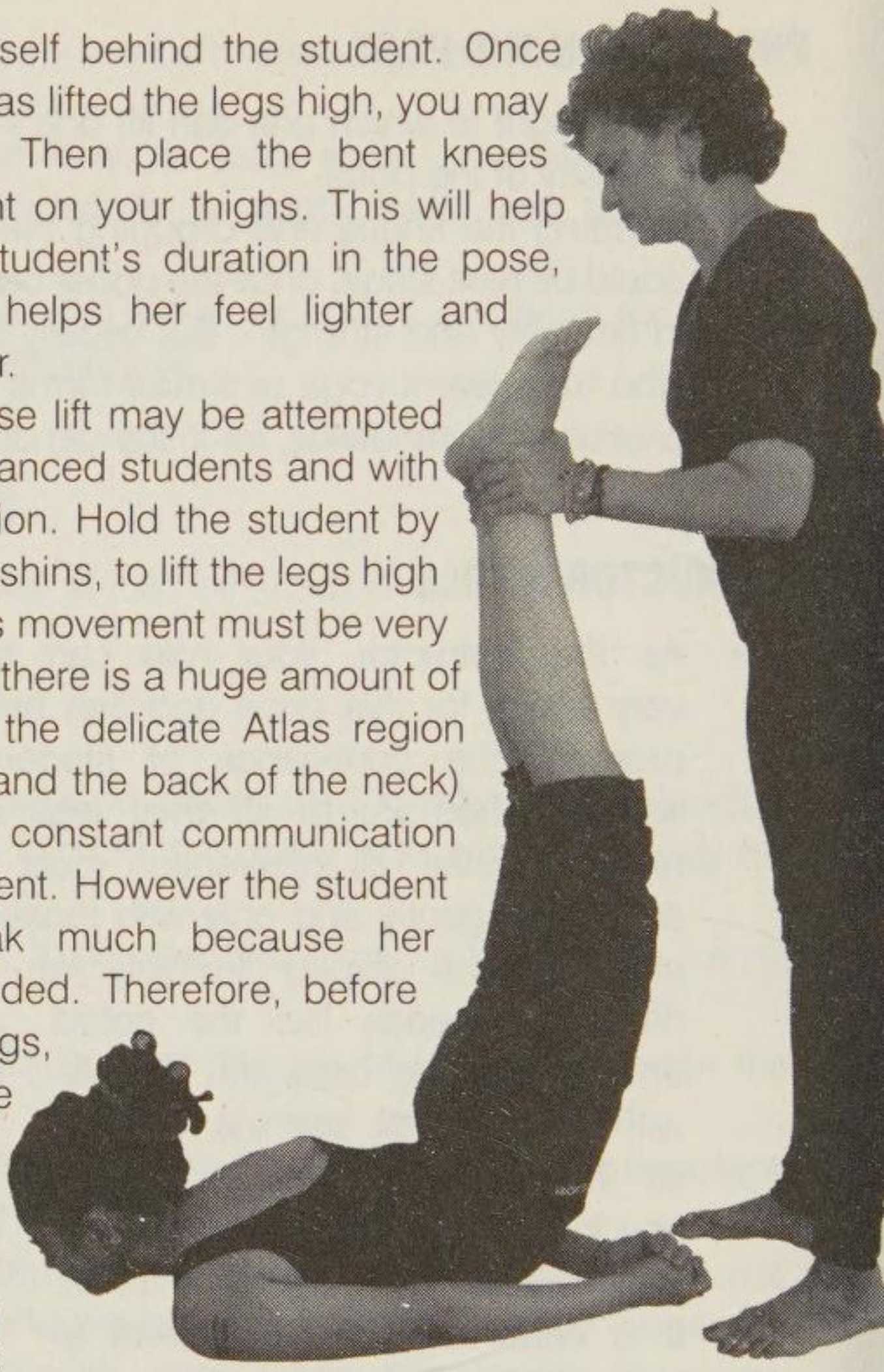
- The height to which one can lift one's legs determines the intensity of the pose.
- Bending the knees and dropping the legs over the head could be next stage, once the upper back and neck develop in flexibility and strength. But usually this is only for those who have learnt yoga or similar forms of flexibility-inducing exercises (gymnastics, for instance) during childhood.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, your role can be very active for this pose and can help promote the confidence of students who are hesitant to lift their legs too high. However, all intervention must be done very gently and only with those students who display flexibility for other backbends like the cobra or the standing crescent. People with upper back stamina usually lift into the pose rather easily; any intervention on your part then will engage the student's neck. It is important for the student to have a flexible and strong neck, and to determine this use your intuitive wisdom.



- Position yourself behind the student. Once the student has lifted the legs high, you may squat lightly. Then place the bent knees of the student on your thighs. This will help extend the student's duration in the pose, and usually helps her feel lighter and breathe better.
- A more intense lift may be attempted only with advanced students and with their permission. Hold the student by the ankles or shins, to lift the legs high in the air. This movement must be very gentle (since there is a huge amount of pressure on the delicate Atlas region of the spine and the back of the neck) and asks for constant communication with the student. However the student cannot speak much because her chin is extended. Therefore, before lifting the legs, a cue must be established, be it a grunt or a word, so the legs are eased back as soon as the student indicates it. Most flexible, advanced and strong students can stay aloft comfortably when the legs are lifted high. In fact, going higher eases the breath by taking the pressure off the diaphragm, the heart and the lungs. Nevertheless even advanced students cannot stay up for a long duration, since the extended neck demands huge muscular effort and can be tiring if held for long.



BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The locust pose promotes mental stamina.

PSYCHIC

- This pose works the vishuddhi chakra.

PHYSICAL

- The benefits of the locust are similar to those enjoyed by practitioners of the half locust.
- The hips, buttocks and the back of the thighs get excellently toned.
- This variation boosts physical stamina and flexibility tremendously.

DHANURASANA

(BOW POSE)

Dhanurasana or the bow pose is a complete and a thorough body workout. It may even be described as an extreme pose, because of the intensity of the hold and the depth of the pose. No matter the level of practice, this pose can never be taken for granted. In fact, this may be said of most backbends; they offer a continual challenge.

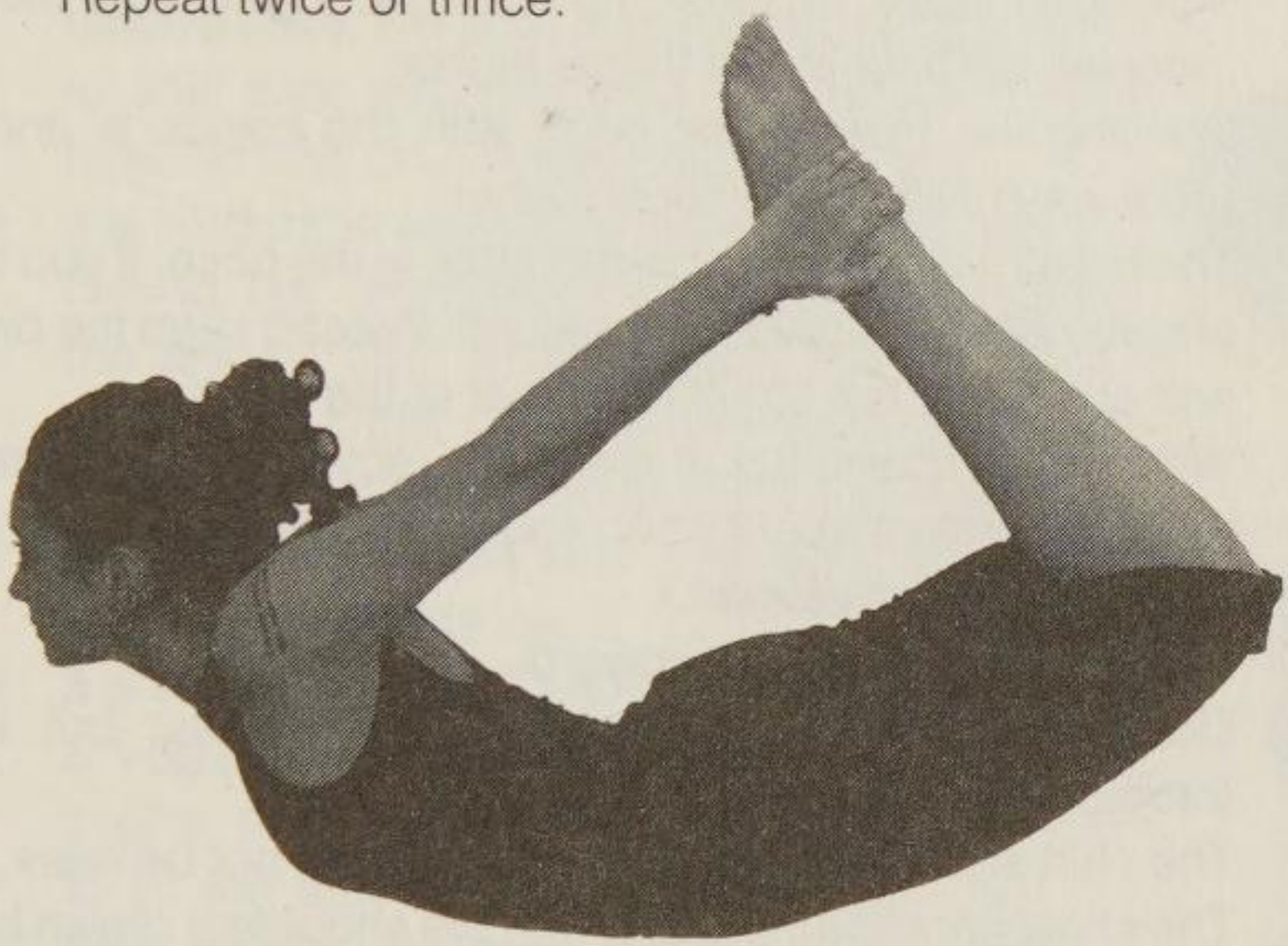
Like all backbends, the bow pose is regarded as a mood elevator. It removes a sense of déjà vu, boredom and mental lethargy, and enhances creative impetus, mental and physical stamina and exhilaration. It works on many chakras at once and can be spiritually cleansing.

Given its many benefits, it is a wonder that the bow pose never gets held for very long in most classes.

METHOD

- Lie on your stomach. You may start with the chin or forehead to the ground.
- Bend the legs at the knees, keeping them a half foot or so apart.
- Reach back with either hand to your ankles.
- Inhale and exhale deeply.
- Inhaling, raise the chin off the ground, expanding the chest. Jut the chin out, continuing normal breathing, as you lift it higher.
- Raise the knees off the ground simultaneously as you lift the chest up.

- Next lift the thighs up too.
- Hold this for 10 to 15 seconds, with normal breathing.
- Relax, to return to the starting position.
- Repeat twice or thrice.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Though it helps one deal with backache (especially of the lower back), it must be taught in a phased manner. Care must be taken to prepare one for the pose with gentler backbends like the cat stretch.
- This pose is not recommended for those with serious heart ailments and circulatory issues. Again, it is often taught to those with blood pressure once the problem has been controlled through yogic diet, lifestyle changes and yogic sadhana.
- The bow pose must be avoided by those with hernia.
- Those with stomach inflammation or ulcers must avoid the bow pose when the condition is aggravated.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The main mistake beginners make is with the arms. Straining at the arms will fatigue the arm and chest muscles

and the pose will slacken. Shifting one's mental focus to the back as the pose is held will shift the strain from the hands to the back. This helps the body get toned.

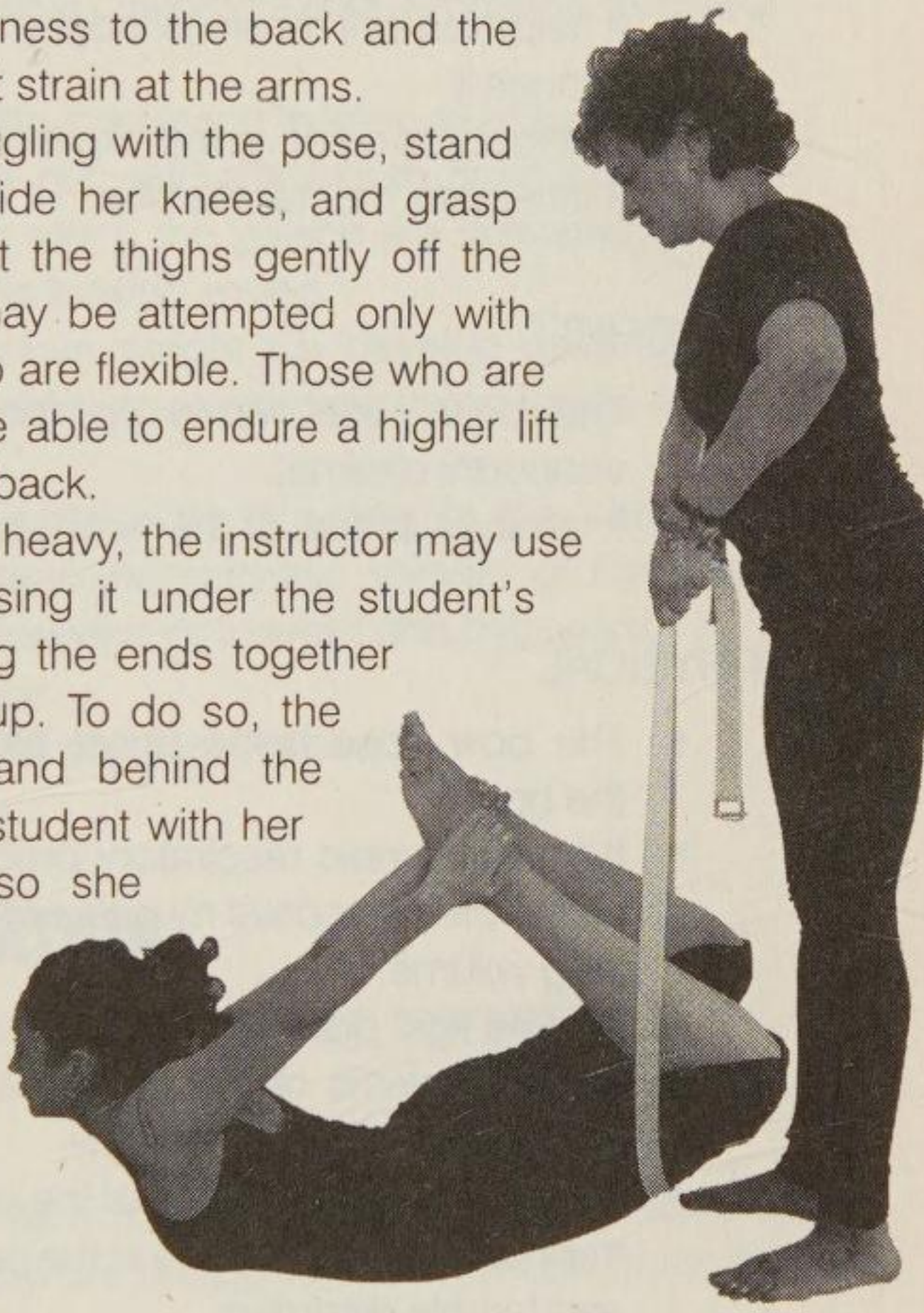
- The other point of focus is the hips. Tightening the hip muscles will help lift the thighs higher.
- Drawing the feet off the body with the hands is another great way of lifting the chest higher.
- The breath will never be comfortable in the pose. If you try to breathe deeply, it will feel unnatural. Instead keep the breath soft so you do not strain the chest or the lungs.
- When in the final stage of this pose, remain on the stomach.
- Keep the arms straight when you go up. (Some people tend to slacken at the elbows.)
- Feet should be pointed upward.
- Do not bring the feet together at the toes, but keep them apart.
- The chin should jut out. The jaw-line must not be relax.
- The chest should jut out too, with the shoulders drawn back.
- The eyes must focus upwards (as this tones the facial skin and muscles).

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Ideally the duration of the final pose should gradually increase.
- Bringing the knees close is tough, but may be gradually introduced at the start or end of the pose, to build the stamina required to engage the muscles. For advanced students, this may be done at the end of the pose; for beginners at the beginning because they will not have the stamina to do it at the end of a long hold.
- Later on, you may hold the pose with the knees closer than when you started, and hold this for the entire duration of the asana.
- Those who are extremely flexible may advance to the full bow pose (poorna dhanurasana), where the head and feet touch and the hands are curved up, from over the head instead of alongside the body.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, giving students suggestions about where they should focus helps them hold challenging poses with relative ease. For instance, you could urge them to shift their awareness to the back and the hips, so they do not strain at the arms.
- If a student is struggling with the pose, stand behind her, alongside her knees, and grasp the ankles; then lift the thighs gently off the ground. But this may be attempted only with those students who are flexible. Those who are very stiff will not be able to endure a higher lift and may strain the back.
- If a student is very heavy, the instructor may use a yoga band, passing it under the student's thighs, then holding the ends together to lift the student up. To do so, the instructor must stand behind the bent knees of the student with her legs wide apart, so she can lift the heavy student at the thighs. Usually, there will be a lot of gravitational resistance.



CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The deep backward curve of this pose prepares you for the other tough poses like the wheel, the scorpion, and the camel pose.
- Like other chest-openers this pose expands lung capacity by making the intercostal muscles between the ribcage supple and elastic. This in turn positively affects your pranayama practice and helps you progress through it with comfort.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The bow pose elevates one's mood and fights depression.
- Since it massages the adrenal glands, stress is controlled.
- It helps remove tensions lodged along the spine, even while it tones it.
- It stimulates creative self-expression and builds confidence.
- It increases mental stamina.

PSYCHIC

- The bow pose works on the manipura, anahata and vishuddhi chakras.
- It removes tamas or the quality of dullness.

PHYSICAL

- The bow pose helps boost blood circulation throughout the body.
- It treats chronic respiratory problems like asthma, since it works the intercostal muscles at the rib cage, and expands lung volume.
- It helps fight diabetes.
- Most problems of the digestive system are controlled by practising this pose regularly.
- It helps control problems of the urogenital system, including the loss of muscular tone at the pelvic muscles, incontinence and female disorders.
- It helps with postural alignment, and especially fights problems with the upper back, such as the dowager's hump.
- By working the back, it tones the region completely, and especially the spinal nerves. Since these control the automatic functions of the body, they help a body under stress revert to a state of homeostasis fast.
- It tones the chest muscles. Usually when women work out using other exercise forms their breast muscles become slack, and their breasts sag. The bow pose reverses this.

- It tones and shapes the gut, the hip muscles, the arms and the legs.
- The bow pose has a positive impact on the thymus gland or the immune system.
- It activates the thyroid, helping settle problems involving that delicate gland.
- It works on the parathyroid gland to keep all tissues healthy.
- When the chin juts out, and the mouth is shut, powerful acupressure points along the jawline are activated. These are said to keep one looking young.
- Again, when we loose weight we develop deep ruts or stretch marks. The bow pose removes these marks almost miraculously.
- The bow pose removes fat, including at the abdomen, especially if one tries the dynamic version of the pose, where one rocks sideways or forward and backward.
- It sweetens the voice.
- The bow pose builds physical stamina.

ADVANCED VARIATION

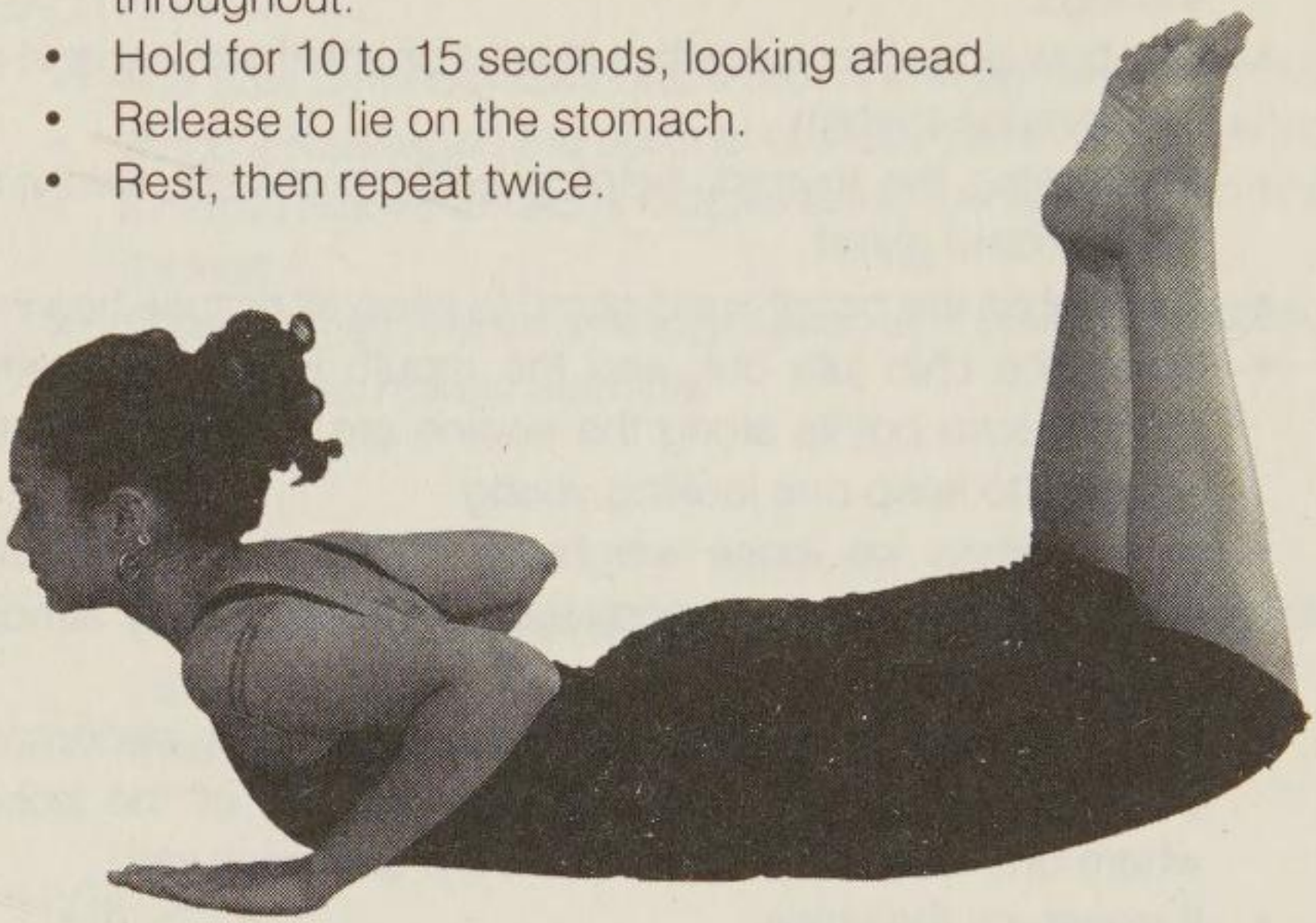
NIRLAMBA DHANURASANA (UNSUPPORTED BOW POSE)

This advanced version is rather interesting, but must be avoided by those who are very stiff and are unable to reach for and grasp the ankles in the bow pose.

METHOD

- Lie on the stomach with the chin on the mat.
- Place the palms under the shoulders, fingers pointed ahead.
- The legs are bent at the knees.
- Inhale and exhale deeply.
- Inhaling, lift the chin, taking chest off the mat. Simultaneously lift the palms up also, keeping them a few inches off the ground, alongside the chest.

- Also, lift the knees off the ground. Continue normal breathing throughout.
- Hold for 10 to 15 seconds, looking ahead.
- Release to lie on the stomach.
- Rest, then repeat twice.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the bow pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- In the unsupported bow pose, lifting the chin up may be difficult. Looking ahead should help you deepen the pose by lifting the palms and knees higher.
- Bring the elbows closer to the body.
- Palms should be parallel to the ground.
- Fingers may also splay due to a lack of awareness. Keep them together to add to the compactness of this pose.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, you should suggest that the shoulders drop. Most students will bunch their shoulders in this pose because it is unsupported by the hand and the gravitational drag makes it difficult for them to comfortably lift the chest

and hands. Urge the students to push the chest out, drawing the shoulder blades together.

- Elbows tend to flare away from the body, also due to a lack of awareness or strength. A constant reminder to keep the arms close to the body is very important for the pose to reach a point of compact tautness.

BENEFITS

- The same as in the case of the bow pose, only more enhanced, especially with respect to building physical and mental stamina.

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA

(HALF SPINAL TWIST)

Though blandly translated as the half spinal twist, the ardha matsyendrasana is actually a supremely powerful pose. Its value can be guessed from its allegiance to the great yogi Matsyendranath. According to the ancient yogic treatise, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, practising this asana can cure any disease, boost digestion, and prod us towards our goals, including spiritual ones.

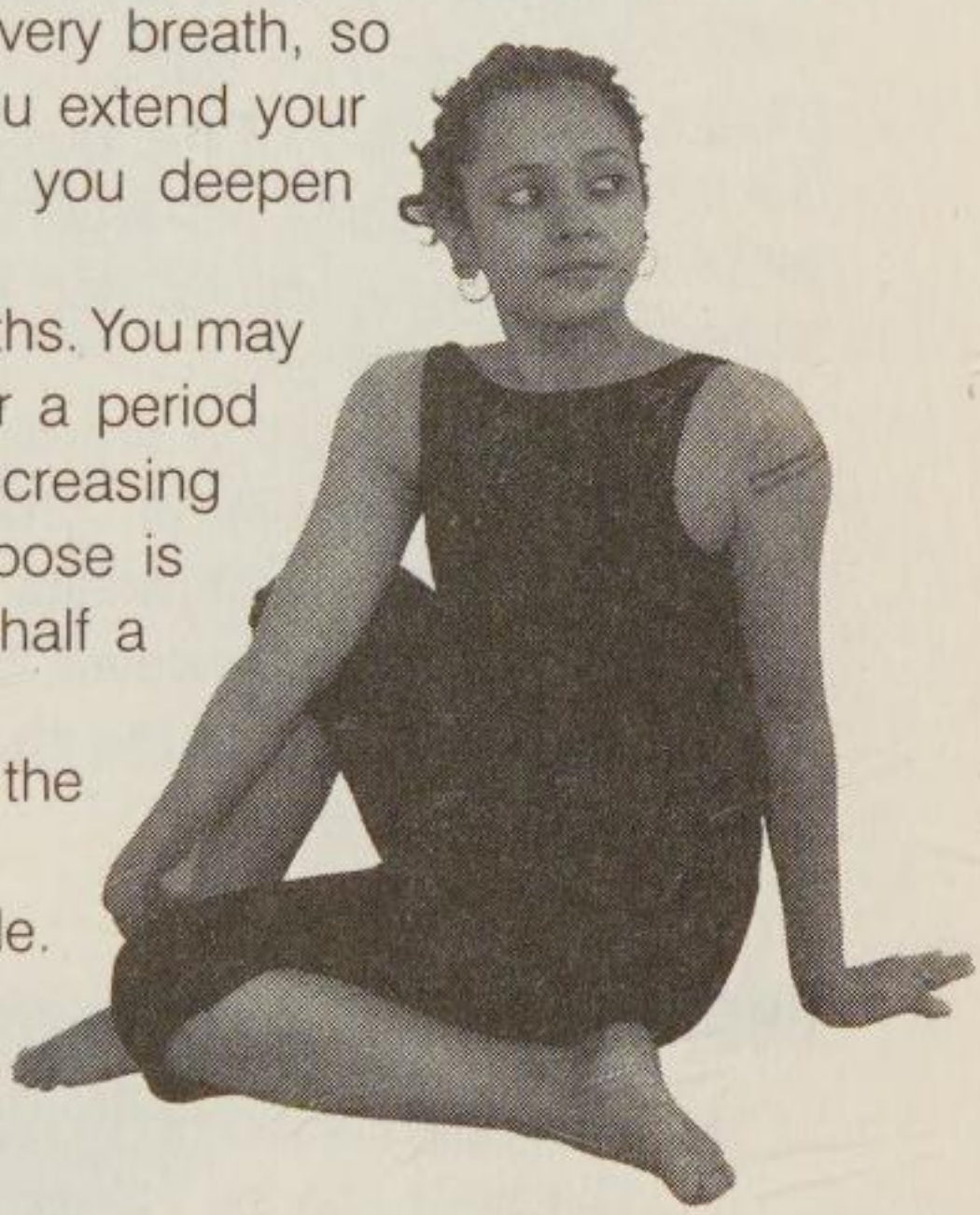
The half spinal twist is regarded a 'kundalini' pose for it clears the movement of our energies along the chakras, since the spine is twisted from the base to the crown. It helps us reach towards the divine. Thus the effects of this pose are far-reaching, and not just limited to the person who practises it!

METHOD

- Sit in the thunderbolt pose. To do this, sit back on your heels, knees touching, hips resting on flared heels. (Another version is given below for those who cannot negotiate this pose.)
- Settle down on your left side, so the left hip and knee are on the ground.
- Raise the right foot to pass it over the left knee. Place the right foot beside the left hip, close to it.
- Inhale, raising the left hand up, passing the left elbow over and around the right knee to grasp the right ankle. Again, most beginners may not possess the flexibility needed for this. For such students, here is an alternative; they may hold

the right leg wherever they can reach. Or, they may place the left elbow over and around the right knee, pressing it towards the body.

- Place the right hand on the ground behind, close to the right hip.
- Inhale deeply. Exhaling, twist over the right shoulder to look behind.
- Continue normal breathing throughout, not releasing the deliberate tension created in the body. In fact, the effect must be deepened with every breath, so that at every inhalation you extend your spine and as you exhale you deepen the twist.
- Hold this for five to ten breaths. You may increase the duration after a period of regular practice, increasing the length for which the pose is held quite comfortably to half a minute or more.
- Inhale. Exhaling, release the pose.
- Repeat this for the other side.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Avoid the half spinal twist
  when suffering from inflammatory conditions or spinal issues. Muted versions may be attempted before entering the extreme squeeze of the spine.
- This pose is 'heating' and you are most likely to break out into sweat while holding it. The breath may also feel strained initially. So hold the pose only as long as you can sustain it at first, extending the duration as you get used to the deliberate tension it creates all over the body.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Draw the raised knee close to the chest before twisting. This will ensure that the squeeze is intense and deep.
- Press down the hips. Sometimes one hip may rise higher unconsciously. This usually happens when you bring the knee close to the chest. Constantly extending isometric pressure from within will help you reach the final perfect pose faster.
- Instead of looking at the shoulder, looking over the shoulder will deepen the twist.
- The intensity of the pose must be consistent throughout. Most students will begin to tire after the pose has been held for a while. Ideally start the twist gently, making it intense towards the end.
- The palm behind the hip must not be too far off, or you will tilt backwards. This will reduce the twist and its impact. For best results, keep the palm of the back hand at the waist. However, this may not work for those who are overtly stiff at the spine or hips since they are likely to lose their balance.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

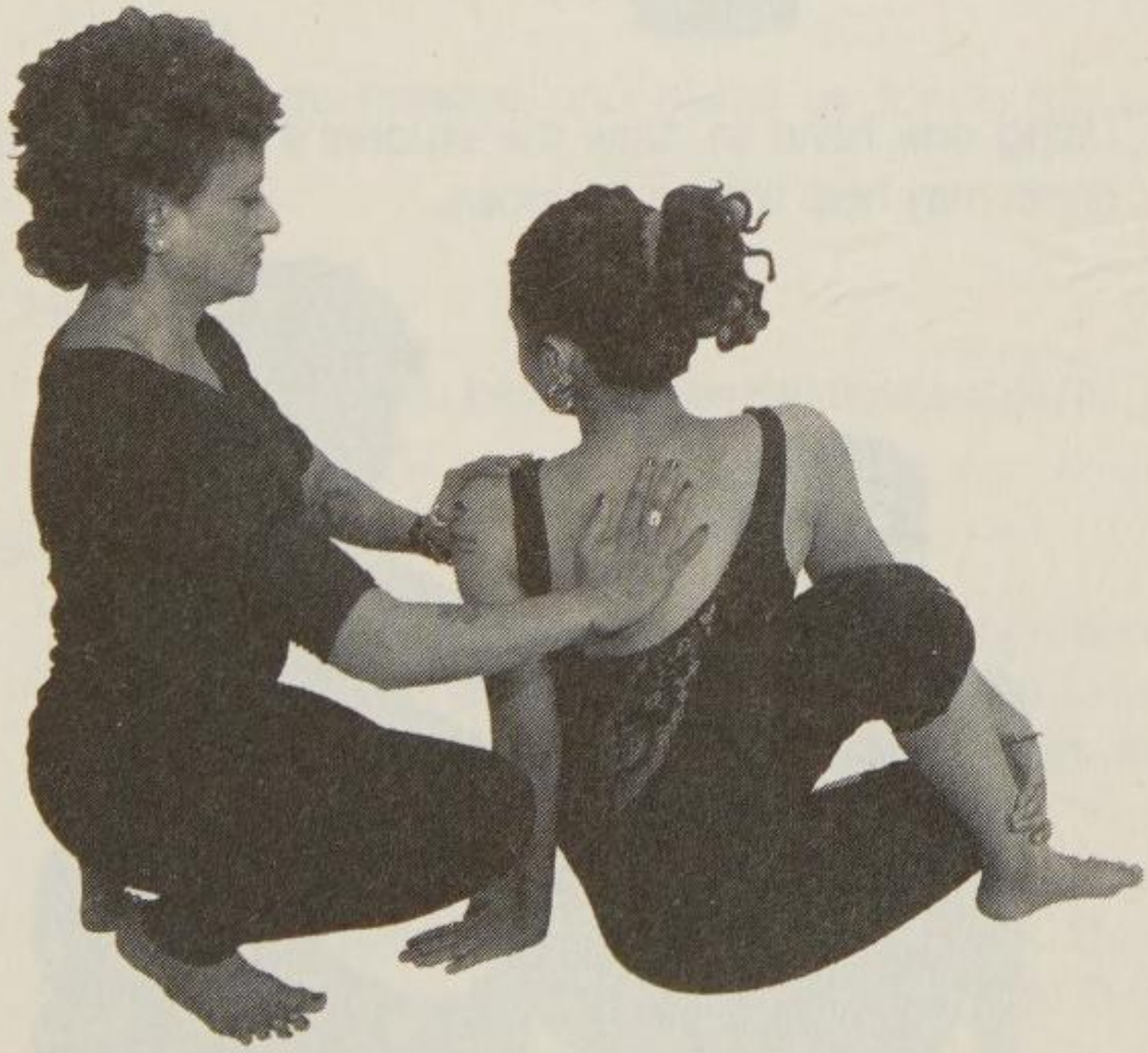
- The depth of the twist determines the progress in this pose. The twist can be intensified over a lifetime and remains a continuous challenge.
- The duration may be progressively increased. It is an intense pose and rather difficult to hold for long periods by beginners. But the time in each side must be increased to one minute or more.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

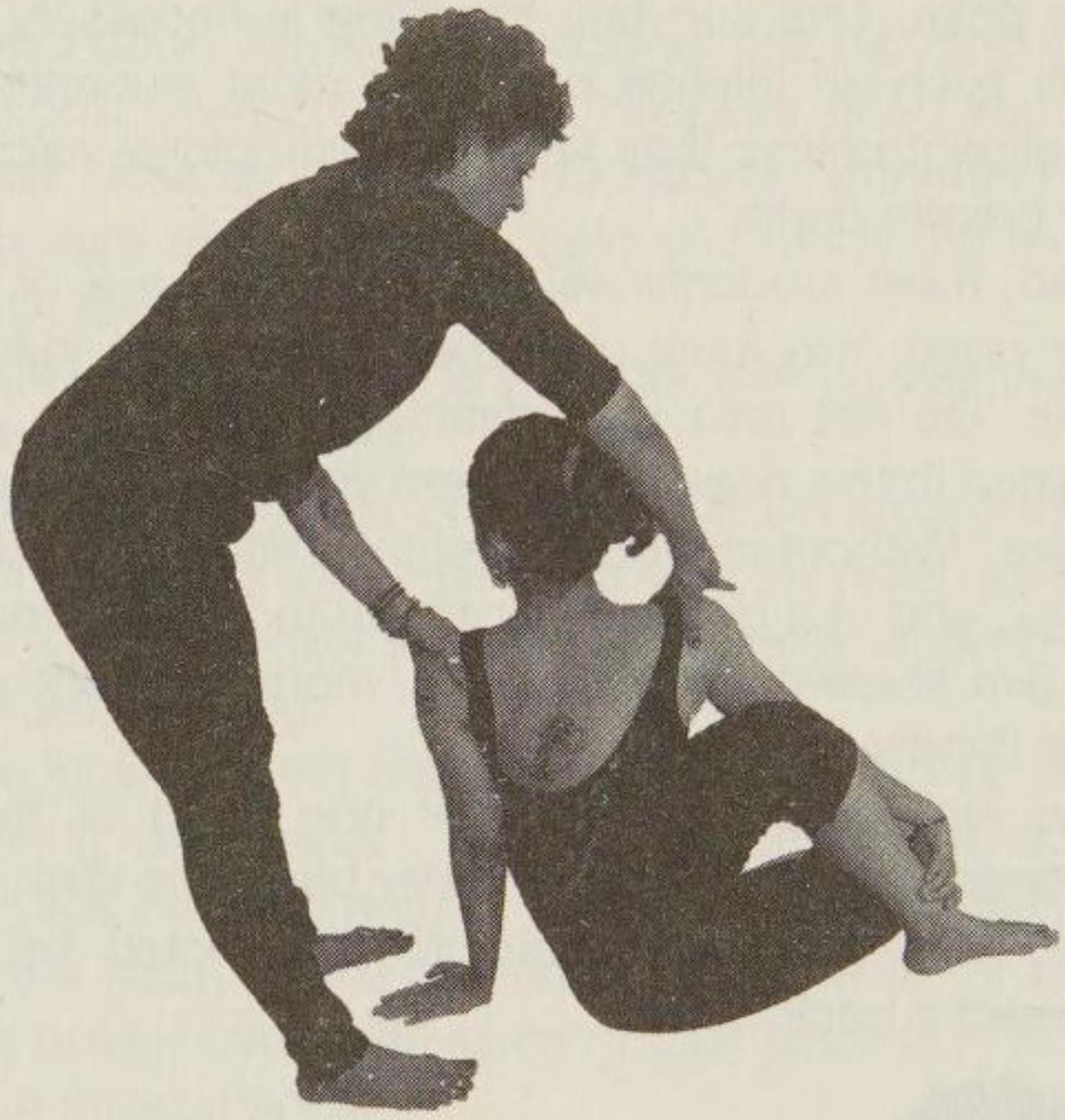
- As an instructor, constantly suggest that the student deepen the pose.
- This is best done by guiding the breath sequence. Suggest: 'As you inhale, extend your spine, as if someone is holding

you up by your hair. As you exhale, move deeper into the pose, one millimetre into it.' When this suggestion is made, you can actually see the students move deeper into the pose. This constant prodding is necessary because it is such an intense pose that most students become negligent unless they hear the instructor's voice call out for greater depth.

- Also, most students will keep looking back or breaking the pose. You must urge them not to. For instance, do say: 'Do not lose the advantage and depth you have gained in this pose. Stay where you are to deepen it even more.' Without instructions of this nature, the student will relax, and in a group this can get to be infectious! If one or two students break a pose, more students will follow suit blindly.
- You may place the back of one hand at the hollow between the student's shoulder blades to direct her with the twisting motion required. This could be used to correct a backward tilt.



- Holding either shoulder with either thumb and index finger, and gently assisting the twist may also prevent a student from tilting backwards.



- Using one hand to draw the student's knee towards her chest may help tighten the pose.

- Because this pose is already so intense, your corrections must be very gentle.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose follows the backbends and forward-bends because it sets the spine, which has been challenged in the earlier asanas, back in form.
- Like other detox poses (such as the peacock pose) it is practised towards the end of one's sadhana. The reason behind this is explained in detail in the chapter titled 'Sequencing a Class'.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The half spinal twist helps treat depression and listlessness due to the impact it has on the spine.
- It helps combat lethargy, dullness, and nervous system disorders.
- This pose de-stresses and calms by toning the adrenal glands.

PSYCHIC

- The half spinal twist balances the manipura chakra.

PHYSICAL

- This pose tones the back, the spine and the spinal nerves. The spinal nerves need to be in peak condition to be able to withstand stress and adapt to the challenges that life throws up.
- It powers respiration. While breathing, our lungs are assisted by muscles in the upper body and neck. These get toned and strengthened with the half spinal twist. The pose therefore helps cure respiratory problems.

- It boosts blood circulation due to the gentle pressure it exerts on the heart.
- It detoxifies the body since it squeezes and releases all the major organ systems that are stacked along the spine. The liver, which plays a key role in the detoxification process and is involved with over 500 functions, also receives the many benefits of this pose's squeeze-release effort.
- The half spinal twist boosts digestion, thus powering nutrient absorption.
- It helps cure constipation.
- The hips are deeply and intensely involved, and thus the entire pelvic region is massaged. That's why this pose is used widely to treat urogenital problems, including menstrual or fertility issues.
- The pose tones the spleen.
- It offers relief in the case of diabetes.
- It treats hypothyroidism.
- It helps us fight stress and adrenal fatigue.

ADVANCED VARIATION

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA (HALF SPINAL TWIST, ADVANCED HAND LOCK VARIATION)

METHOD

- Follow the instructions listed for the half spinal twist.
- Once the legs are in place, pass the left hand over the right knee, so the hand moves under it. Pass the right hand behind, to hold the left hand. Firm up the hold by locking the fingers, before executing the twist.
- Repeat these steps for the other side.
- Here, the advanced move involves the hand lock. Though most people believe that this asks for flexibility of the hands,

the truth is that this demands flexibility of the spine, hips and the waist, and the ability to stretch at the shoulders.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

The same as in the case of the basic half spinal twist.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The greater the twist, the firmer the hand lock becomes. This can surprise many who actually strain at the hands instead of twisting, which eventually softens the spine.
- Ensure that you are not tilting back. Most people who move into this advanced pose tend to tilt over, ruining the twist and its benefits. The compromise can become a learned habit. Awareness of the backward tilt helps fight the natural tendency to favour the hand lock over the twist.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- The above corrections should be constantly suggested so as to ensure that students do not lose sight of the main aim of the pose – which is giving the spine an intense transverse twist.

BENEFITS

- The benefits are similar to those listed for the half spinal twist, only more intense.
- The arms are also superbly toned, especially the shoulders and upper arms. The pose can ease the stress locked in the upper back.
- The squeeze at the belly is also intense, thus aiding digestion.

KAKASANA

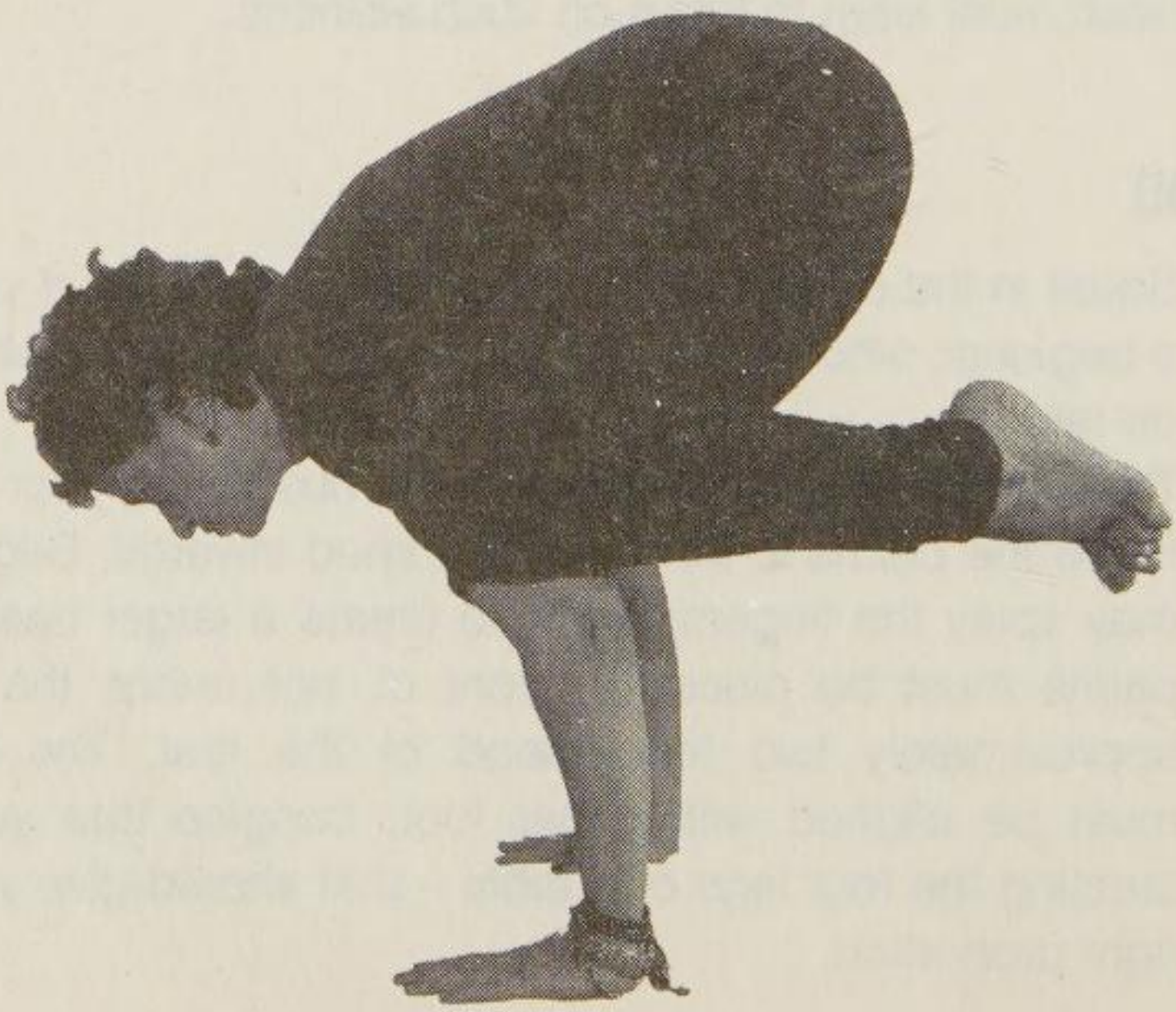
(CROW POSE)

Instructors can get quarrelsome about the name of this pose. Often referred to also as bakasana or the crane pose, this asana succinctly sums up the whole philosophy and attitude of yoga, even more than the headstand – your mind must be still, your focus perfect, your strengths built through practice. Most of us unfortunately have learnt to listen to the static of the subconscious (fear, anxiety, embarrassment, desperation). To complete this pose, therefore, one must shut out all distractions, including those that come to pass in class – people looking at each other, or the sound of beginners falling on the mat as they attempt the pose. This is why the crow pose isn't easy to teach. For it doesn't rely merely on physical strength. It is a pose for the mind, which not only has to be still but also must learn to focus on such stillness.

METHOD

- Squat in the centre of your mat. This is essential if you are a beginner, since then, you will avoid hurting yourself if you do fall.
- The feet are about a foot apart. You must be on your toes.
- Place the palms in front, lightly turned inwards. Beginners may splay the fingers lightly, to create a larger base. The palms must be placed in front of, not under, the body, approximately two feet ahead of the feet. The hands must be aligned with either foot. Imagine that you are creating the four legs of a table – that should give you the right proportion.

- Tilt the torso gently, till the knees lock into the upper arm. Ensure that the knees are at the middle of the upper arm. Advanced practitioners of this pose may keep the knees at the armpit or shoulders. But beginners can keep the knees at mid-arm so the lift is low, and the body and mind get acclimatized to this exciting pose.
- Ensure the knees are locked on the arms. Usually very anxious students will find that the knees keep sliding back. This has little to do with strength or the lack of it; rather it is because anxiety shifts awareness.
- If you are a beginner, bend the elbows lightly. This gives you a physical ledge from which your knees will not slide off.
- Look ahead, so the chin juts lightly out. This is the best approach for beginners; it protects them from falling face down. Advanced students who are used to this pose can focus anywhere, including downward, at the space below their faces.
- Ideally both beginners and advanced students should keep a point of focus ahead – for instance, some small item, like a ring (or something innocuous and similarly small; the smaller the object the better the focus). Train your eyes to observe this continuously while lifting up. This aspect of the pose cannot be overemphasised, for the



object cheats the mind into relaxing and helps shut out subconscious chatter.

- Avoid shifting the point of focus constantly. Often such corrections are signs of extreme nervousness. If the body experiences signals of fear, it will not lift you up! For instance, you do not need to keep looking down at your hands. You must develop awareness, without looking down, about where your hands are.
- Keeping the eyes fixed on the chosen object of focus, now tilt the body into the arms, the knees still locked at the mid upper arm. The weight of the body must shift completely into the arms at this point.
- Once you experience the weight shift, come up on your big toes.
- Then float one big toe off the ground. Then lift the other big toe off the ground. Both feet are now well off the ground. Initially hold this pose for a short duration only. You may lengthen the duration with regular practice.
- To release yourself from the pose, exit by dropping back lightly on the feet. Relax.
- Resist the temptation to keep trying the pose multiple times, since this will come in the way of perfecting it. Do it once, with minimal corrections. This will give you confidence over time.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with weak wrists should avoid this pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- The position of the feet often speaks of how comfortable the mind is with the pose. Some students tend to point the heels towards each other. This is very awkward. Not only does it look ungainly, but you also risk falling back. How you control your feet determines the base for this pose.

- Beginners tend to hold their breath while up in the pose because breathing can create a slight wobble that makes them anxious. If you become aware of this and begin to breathe normally, you will find you can stay up longer because, obviously, when you do not breathe the muscles will tire easily in a tough pose like this.
- Usually if the point of focus is sustained, you will overcome early anxieties.
- The fingers on the ground must not be stiff. They have to be loose and relaxed because they are gauging the weight requirements of the pose. Moreover, the nerve signals from the fingers are being transmitted to the brain, to involve the entire body and the mind.
- It is important that the cue for lifting the toes emphasizes the idea of floating up. Most students will kick up into the pose, and therefore risk falling forward. Impulse control is most significant here!

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Advanced students who have the stamina required for the final pose may increase the duration of the crow pose by bringing the toes together. This locks the tendency of the feet to draw down, which can be dissatisfying. With the feet lightly touching, you stay up longer.
- With regular practice, as you gain in strength and confidence, you must learn to move the knees up higher on the arms, almost to the armpit.
- Also, and this is an extremely fine point, with a high crow (as opposed to a low one, which is relatively safe for a beginner), the knee must lock in more firmly, drawing muscular effort from the hips. The arms should be fairly straight. This is a very demanding approach to the pose, but it builds muscular strength in the hands, legs and hips. A low crow, on the other hand, only works the wrists.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Beginners will display high anxiety while practising the pose. Constantly checking and suggesting that they follow the instructions (especially concentrating on the point of focus) is very crucial.
- Intriguingly, if you place the newcomer near an advanced student who can complete this pose, you will find that the former picks up the pose without even looking at the latter. This may have something to do with the law of synchronicity, an experience which puzzles scientists, but has been established by research as a potential way of learning difficult skills.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose prepares you for all the other arm balancers that are tough.
- It is similar to the headstand and other difficult inversions.
- It develops mental focus that can help with other balancers like the scorpion.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- Mental focus and stamina get superbly developed.
- The quality of vairagya – the core philosophical message of yoga, emphasizing detachment and renunciation – is acquired due to the fact that the pose encourages mind control.
- It is therapeutic if one is dealing with shyness, attention deficit disorders or stuttering.
- It is deeply calming, if one learns to hold the pose for a long duration.

PSYCHIC

- The crow pose can ground one, cooling down the vata dosha, if one learns to hold it for a long duration.
- It removes the lethargy of the kapha personality. Usually kapha personalities know a lot about yoga theoretically but resist practice due to their natural disinclination towards co-ordinated movements.
- The crow pose also softens the competitive pitta dosha.
- It can improve meditative focus.

PHYSICAL

- The crow pose strengthens the arms and the wrists.
- All arm balancers which come with a body tilt have an effect similar to the headstand – blood gushes to the face and brain, keeping one young and vital.
- The hips get extremely toned if you learn to lock the knees into the arms and lift higher than a beginner. This advanced muscular effort is supported largely by the hips and legs.

ADVANCED VARIATION

BHUJAPIDASANA (SHOULDER PRESSING POSE)

METHOD

- Stand up straight, with feet shoulder width apart.
- Squat, tilting the torso ahead, so you can place the palms flat on the ground, from inside the legs, beside either foot.
- As you place your palms, bunch up your back, to place the thighs high up on the arms. The arms may be bent lightly at this stage to accommodate this movement.
- Lift the legs so they are parallel to the ground.
- Straighten the hands, so the legs lift more.
- This must be done gradually, to avoid falling back as is most likely to happen.

- Keep the chest ahead, face looking in the front, pushing the arms into the thighs as you lift up.
- When the legs are up in mid air, cross the left ankle over the right one. Stay up. Breathe normally throughout.
- Hold the pose. Then release the legs gently back to the ground. You may also release the pose by walking the feet back to the palms and standing up lightly, as you did to begin with.
- Initially you may have to try this pose several times, over several days, to reach the appropriate centre, so you do not tip back. You may also use blocks by the palms – which reduce gravitational drag – to lift yourself up.
- Rest. Then repeat with the right ankle crossed over the left leg.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- The same as in the case of the crow pose.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Pressure should be applied by pressing the legs into the arms.
- The toes should be splayed to make the pose lighter.
- Ensure that you continue to breathe. Generally, in the case of difficult poses, the breath is stopped unconsciously.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- As you determine the perfect centre in this pose, and grow in strength and flexibility, try to keep the legs higher than earlier. This will be achieved if you lift the legs high, and keep the thighs parallel to the ground to the greatest extent possible.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- All balancing poses reach into the nervous system, to impact the cerebellum which is involved with the body's sense of space or proprioception. In fact, the messages to locate a centre come from nerves, muscle fibres and joints. This pose engages subtle parts of the body and mind that have never worked out in this fashion before.
- The cerebellum is also involved with cognitive learning, the ability to learn new skills, eye-limb movement and co-ordination, and memory. Balancing poses have a positive impact on all of this.
- This pose develops mental stamina and focus.

PHYSICAL

- This pose helps one grow in strength and endurance. After all, you are lifting the entire weight of your body on your delicate wrists.
- The benefits here replicate those of most inversions – the rush of blood to the face and brain keep one looking young.

TRIKONASANA

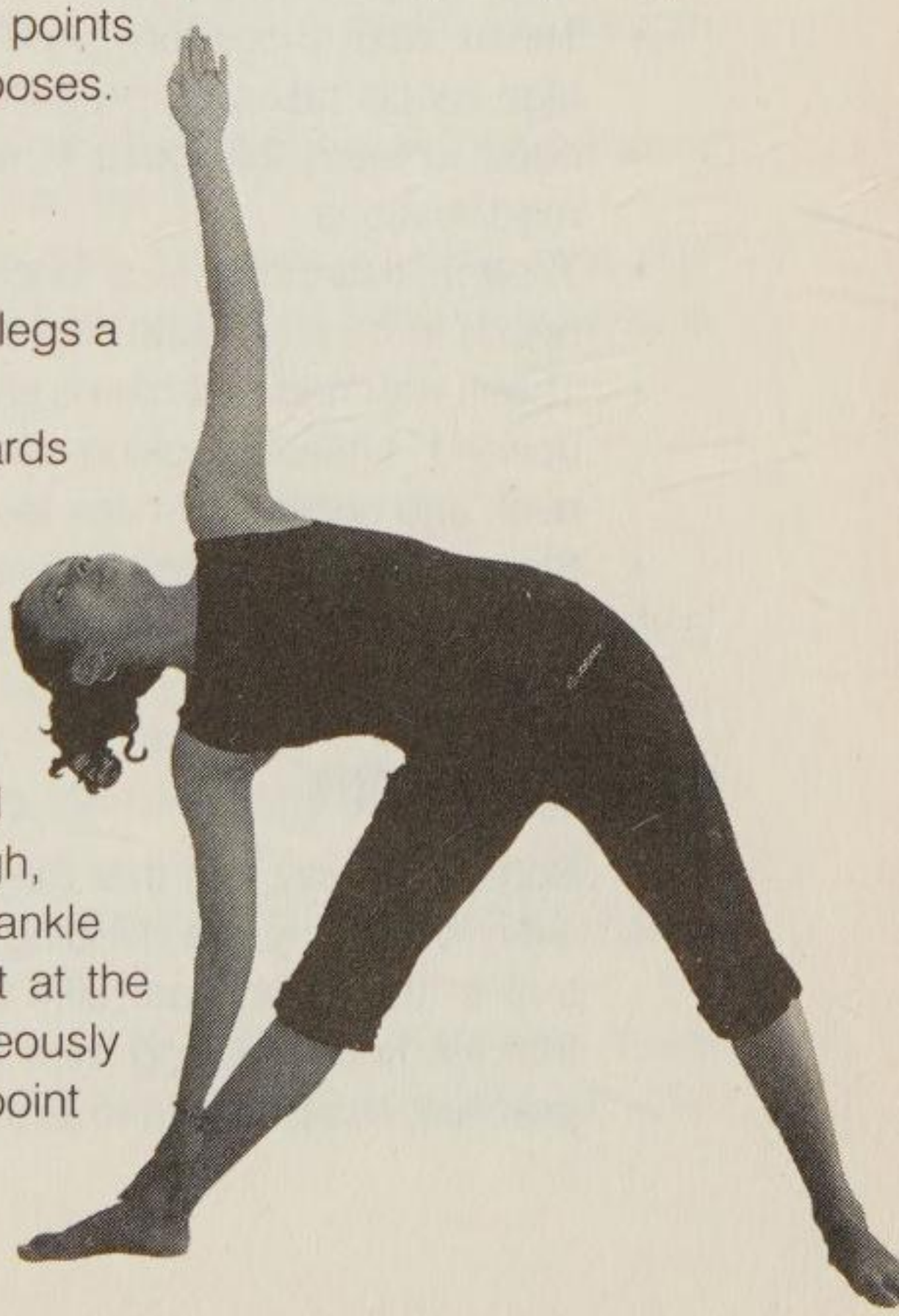
(TRIANGLE POSE)

This pose is named after the several triangles it creates with the torso and limbs. It is a powerful pose and may be executed dynamically or in a static state; both versions are demanding.

It is also an exciting pose because its remains a constant challenge and gives room for progress since there are various modes of extending the stretch, a variety of dhrishti (focal points) in the final position, and several points of entry via other preparatory poses.

METHOD

- Stand up straight, with legs a metre apart.
- Point the right foot towards the right side.
- Inhale, extending arms out on the sides, at shoulder level.
- Exhale, and slide down the right hand along the right thigh, moving it to the right ankle (if possible) to place it at the right ankle. Simultaneously raise the left hand to point to the ceiling.



- Breathe normally, to ensure that your balance is perfect.
- Inhale, to look up at the raised left hand.
- Breathing normally ensure that the body is well aligned, so that the hip and the raised hand are lined up. Beginners are likely to move the hips back if particularly stiff.
- Hold this for a few seconds initially, before inhaling and returning to the starting position.
- Repeat this for the other side.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with vertigo usually suffer a dizzy spell or may feel nauseous when attempting backbends and balancers. So this pose must be taught only in a phased manner. Vertigo is also often experienced by those with neck problems, chronic respiratory ailments, inner ear infections, blood sugar yo-yos or by patients who are on medication.
- Those with circulatory problems, and with either low or high blood pressure problems or heart disease may also need to learn this pose in a phased manner with certain modifications.
- Though this pose is a back toner, the same precaution needs to be taken with those with severe back problems.
- Those with neck problems should not be turning their head upward. Instead looking ahead will tone their spine and neck and strain their neck less.
- Since challenging twists stimulate the nervous system, such poses must be avoided close to bed time.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Beginners may find that they may have to bend the knee, even while they are bending towards it. This is particularly true of those who are stiff. However, they must be aware that the knee is being bent and that, over a few weeks of practice, it is possible to straighten it.

- Most beginners also may be careless about the positioning of the foot. They will have to ensure that the foot, on the side where they are bending, is pointed out. This will protect the knee and the hip joint.
- One must constantly monitor whether the lifted hand, hip, and the stretched leg (on the side towards which one is bending) are in one line.
- Beginners will most likely tilt the torso forward to protect either the back or the thighs from the pose's intense stretch. They should be constantly vigilant and control this tendency.
- The lifted hand has to be straight. On holding the pose for a while the hand is likely to get tired first. However, do not bend it.
- Most importantly, as pointed above, shifting awareness to ensure that the weight is not resting on the hand positioned below is very crucial, and will help develop the inner thighs and hip region.
- Pushing the back foot into the mat will create more strength in both the legs.
- Keeping the legs wide while starting the pose will create a better stretch along the saddle region.
- Constantly shifting awareness to the neck, arms, legs and extending them will create the muscular support needed to hold this pose.

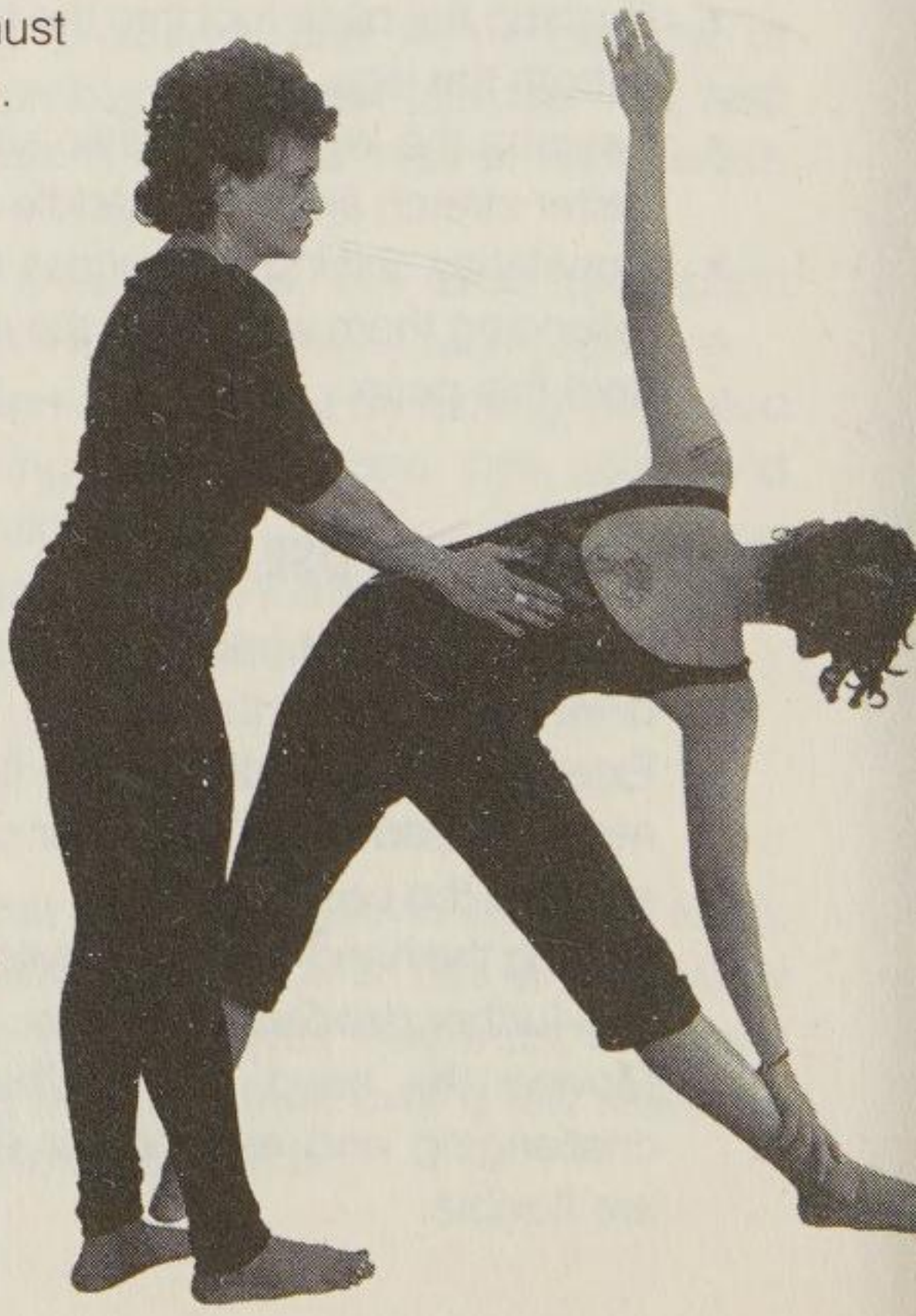
PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Keeping the right hand close to the right foot when bending down will intensify the stretch.
- Extending the duration of the final pose to half a minute or more will add to the muscular challenge and the grounding effect of the pose.
- Moving the hand to place it over the foot is more challenging and further deepens the pose.
- Moving the hand behind the foot can even be more challenging and exciting for advanced practitioners who are flexible.

- Most importantly, learning to shift awareness so that the weight of the body is not resting on the hand but is firmly on the thighs and hips will strengthen and tone the hips further.
- Doing the pose dynamically will also create the fast-twitch muscle fibres; the dynamic version may also be attempted by those who feel sluggish or wish to lose weight.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, keep tabs on the flexible students and ensure that they are not bending the knees. Often students forget this aspect of the pose even though they may have started with both legs straight. This especially happens when the muscles tire, after holding the pose for a while. Remind the students not to succumb.
- The lifted hand will also slacken after a while, moving back or in the front, or even bend lazily. Again you must draw attention to this.
- Tapping gently on the bent knee, with your foot or your hand is a way of reminding students about correct posture.
- Positioning your palm at the curve of the lower back to ensure that the back is not relaxing, resists the forward tilt of the body.
- Alternatively, placing either palm on the stomach and the



lower back of the student gently to indicate the central alignment of the hip and torso will also help students grasp the point. Though most students may not mind such contact, some may not like being touched at the navel. So this correction must be used judiciously.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- Though the triangle pose seems like a full-body stretch, it also trains one's sense of balance and sharpens proprioception skills. Therefore it is reached more easily by those who are confident with simple balancing poses like the one-legged prayer pose (ekapada pranamasana) or the tree pose (vrikshasana).
- This pose may be entered from the wide legged standing forward-bend or any of the warrior series or even the standing crescent. Various points of entry may be tried to create an exciting clutch of standing poses.
- Consciously extending the lifted hand will create more confidence in the pose and will raise the practice bar.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The triangle pose stimulates the mind, and battles depression.
- All wringing twists, including this, remove tension from the body and can be used to de-stress.
- When held with awareness and focus, the pose can have a grounding effect that can calm hyper anxious people.
- It fights lethargy and dullness.
- The triangle pose can combat anger and aggressiveness when held steadily.
- All balancers boost self-confidence, and help with impulse control.
- The triangle pose helps treat the chronic fatigue syndrome which is often a symptom of overworked stress glands or adrenals.

- Since the pose works both sides of the body, these in turn create harmony between the two brain hemispheres so that the logical and the emotional components in us work in tandem.

PSYCHIC

- The triangle pose helps balance the manipura chakra.

PHYSICAL

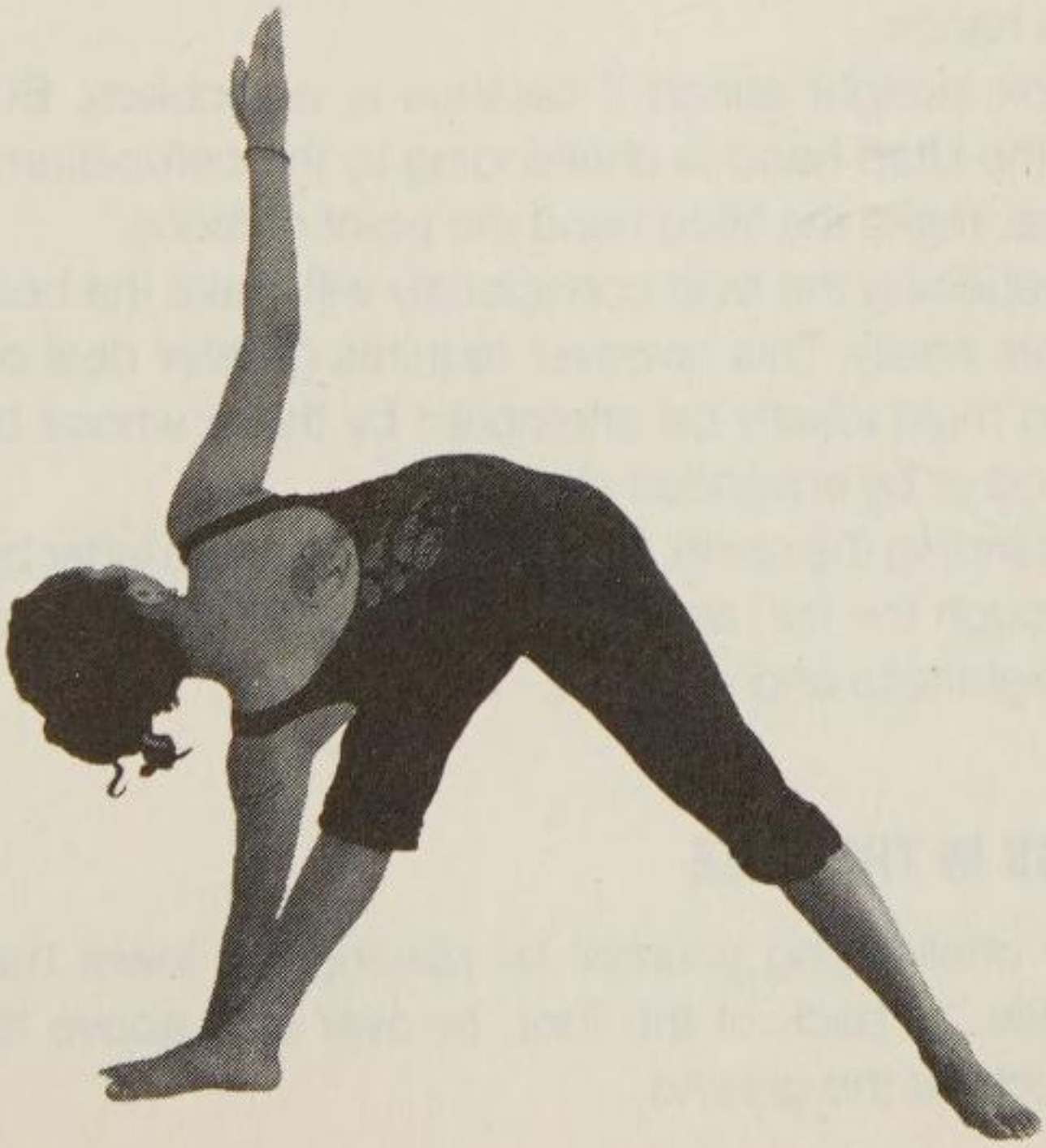
- The triangle pose tones the entire digestive system, and improves digestion, builds metabolism, and boosts nutrient absorption.
- It eases constipation, as do all twists. They are known to help detoxify the body.
- The triangle pose addresses reproductive ailments for both sexes.
- It tones the kidneys, the legs, hips and hands, and the entire spine.
- It helps with weight loss. It removes fat from the inner thighs and waist region.
- It rectifies postural defects.
- It helps with limb co-ordination.
- It develops skills of balance or proprioception in the body.
- It is good for diabetic patients.
- One's breath is deepened due to the effect on the diaphragm and this is excellent for those with chronic respiratory problems.

ADVANCED VARIATION

PARIVRTTA TRIKONASANA (TWISTED TRIANGLE POSE)

METHOD

- Stand up straight, with the hands out at shoulder level, feet a metre apart, as described for the basic triangle pose.
- Inhale. Turn the right foot so it points to right side.
- Exhale, and twist to the right side to place the left hand beside the right foot.
- Simultaneously, look ahead or above.
- The right hand is also right above.
- Ensure that the hands and hips are in one line or aligned.
- Breathe normally throughout.
- Hold for a few seconds if new to the pose.
- Release, standing back upright, inhaling.
- Repeat for the opposite side.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- The same as in the case of the basic triangle pose, especially for those who feel dizzy while practising such twists or balancers.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Both hands must be straight.
- Ensure you are not resting the body's weight on the hand placed below.
- Ensure that the knees are not bending. In this pose, most students are likely to bend both knees either because they are stiff or due to a lack of awareness. If stiff, the knee towards which you are bending may be bent till the spine or legs get supple. But those who are flexible should avoid bending at the knees.
- The lifted hand is most likely to slacken. It must be aligned with the hips.
- The torso is also likely to be misaligned. Constant awareness can rectify this by ensuring that the hips are in line with the hands.
- Look straight ahead if balance is a problem. But looking at the lifted hand is challenging to the cerebellum. So over time, make the lifted hand the point of focus.
- Deepening the twist consciously will make the body stretch more easily. This however requires greater deal of balance and must ideally be attempted by those whose balance is good or by advanced students.
- Extending the spine, the arms and legs (the latter by pushing through the feet and heels in particular) will add to a sense of lightness and strength.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Try challenging yourself by placing the lower hand at the ankle, at back of the foot, or over and above the foot to reach for the ground.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Your role as the instructor has been described under the basic triangle pose. You need to urge your students to deepen the twist, extend the legs, and ensure that the hands do not relax. They must also be asked to shift awareness, and transfer the weight from the hand to the saddle region and hips.
- The dynamic version may be attempted in the beginning of the class to boost collective energy. It also may be used when the group wishes to lose weight. The static version is grounding and may be used to wind up the class.

BENEFITS

- The same as those listed for the basic triangle pose, though intensified.
- This variation is recommended for those with respiratory problems.

UTTANASANA

(INTENSE STRETCH FORWARD STRETCH POSE)

This deceptively simple pose works not just by extending the spine but also the limbs. It is demanding even for advanced practitioners.

The flexibility needed to deepen the pose and the strength needed to stay in it for a long duration prove to be a challenge. The most intriguing aspect of this pose is that it can also intensely test one's sense of balance. In all this, it is a complete pose, very much like the headstand. It replicates the latter's benefits without mirroring its side-effects.

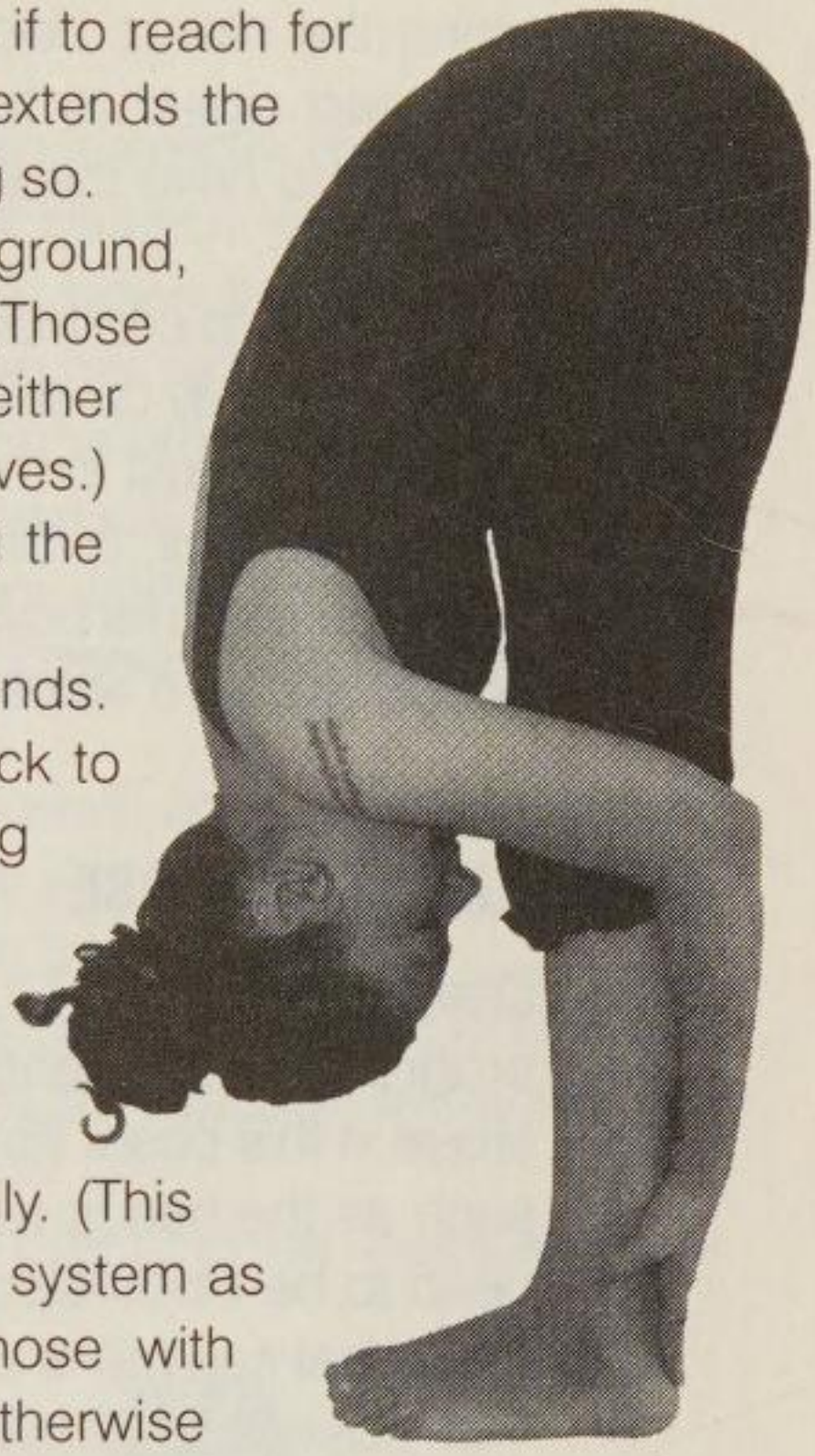
PLEASE NOTE

For the sun salutation, we have suggested that you bend your legs at the knees. However when the forward stretch is done as a stand-alone you must not bend the knees. For the sun salutation, allowances are made so the basic flow does not get disrupted. In the case of the stand-alone forward stretch, bending the knees may reduce the impact on the back of the legs and the spine.

METHOD

- Stand up straight. The feet should touch lightly inside.
- Inhale, raising the arms as high as you can, extending the spine.

- Exhale, lowering the arms, as if to reach for the wall in front. This further extends the spine. Look ahead while doing so.
- Gently lower the hands to the ground, and reach for the ground. (Those who are stiff may reach for either ankle, the shins or even the calves.)
- Hang the head low, releasing the neck deliberately to relax it.
- Stay initially for just a few seconds.
- Then slowly, raise yourself back to the starting position by hanging the hands loose, the body lolling like a rag doll. The slower the movement, the better the impact of the pose both emotionally and physically. (This also defuses the shock to the system as the blood pressure shifts; those with blood pressure issues will otherwise feel slightly dizzy when standing up too fast.)



CONTRAINDICATIONS

This pose is not to be attempted by those with severe lower back issues.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- It is important to focus on the back of the legs. Most people strain from the spine. Correcting one's sense of awareness and fine tuning it, so different parts of the body get involved, is very important.
- Pushing the heels down and the knees back is a good way to work the back of the legs for this pose.
- Flaring the elbows outwards or drawing the lower arms

along the calves helps tighten the pose. This also draws the head closer to the legs. This is particularly useful for those who have the physical flexibility to reach deeper into the pose.

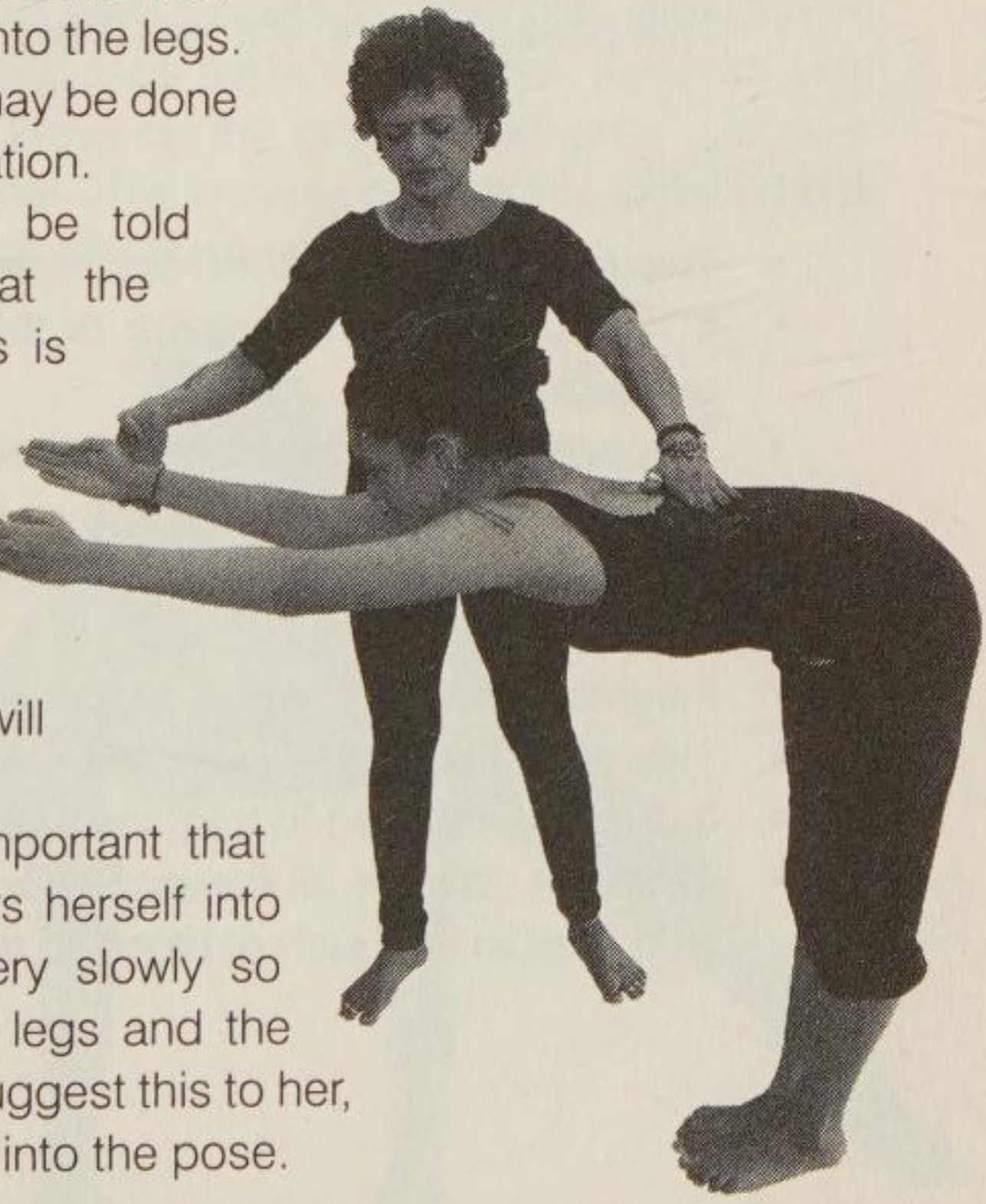
- Remember to continue normal breathing throughout. Initially the breath may be strained. But the quality of your pose and practice, not just in this instance but in the case of all other asanas as well, is determined by the smoothness of your breath in the final position. This stage of reaching the pose deeply is called asana jaya (victory over the pose).

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- Deepening the pose is the most exciting aspect as one progresses. The head reaching to touch the legs is the first stage in this pose. For many people, it could be far simpler, such as the hands reaching the feet! However, all of them need to be celebrated for the extension and suppleness of the spinal column and the legs.
- The pose has different hand locks around the feet, the ankles or the knees, to bring the head closer to the legs. The ability to hold the pose for a long duration with the head against the legs suggests both strength and flexibility.
- Also, the depth of the pose may be gauged by how far the head reaches the legs – this could start at the thighs but once spinal and leg suppleness are achieved, the head may dip as low as the knees or even the shin! From here, the ability to shift the hand hold, from the ankles to the feet, or below the feet, is another important milestone.
- Keeping the palms flat on the ground is also a stage worth working towards.
- The position of the palms ahead or behind the feet can extend the stretch even more dramatically.
- The ability to extend the time in this pose consistently, from half a minute to over a minute or more, is one of the most exciting aspects while practising.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- In the final pose, your role as an instructor may be intrusive because of the tricky sense of balance involved. So if the student is hesitant or unable to reach the complete pose, you may stand alongside, have her extend the arms while reaching forward. Let her keep the arms extended. Placing your hand at the lower back curve will push the spine gently inwards towards the hips from where the pose is better reached. Then the student may gently lower herself into the final pose.
- Constant verbal suggestion to push or deepen the posture from the back of the knees, by pushing them out, will help students extend themselves on their own.
- Often students stop breathing in the final pose, and verbal suggestions that remind them to continue breathing are important.
- You may also recommend that they hold the knees and flare the elbows outwards, to draw the head further into the legs. This move itself may be done best on an exhalation.
- Students should be told not to strain at the hands. Often this is the unconscious mistake they make while trying to draw the head closer to the legs. This will tire them.
- Also it is very important that the student lowers herself into the final pose very slowly so as to extend the legs and the spine. You may suggest this to her, to gently lead her into the pose.



CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose helps prepare you for the headstand, by acclimatizing you to the gush of blood to the head and brain. It helps with other inversions for a similar reason.
- The intense stretch at the legs allows you to deal with other stretches like the plough, or the seated forward-bend.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This pose is very soothing for stress-driven individuals and for those who think too much! It calms the brain through the gush of blood to the head.
- It is said to fight anger, tension, depression and lethargy.
- It is both stimulating and calming.

PSYCHIC

- This pose works on the swadhistana chakra.

PHYSICAL

- This pose helps clear the sinus, and prevents sinusitis.
- It helps address urogenital problems, including infertility and kidney issues.
- The pose is also useful for women who are suffering from menopause.
- It is used to treat most digestive ailments.
- It tones the liver.
- It fights obesity, tones the limbs, and works out the hips.
- This pose helps treat diabetes.
- It is recommended to treat insomnia.
- As in the case of all forward-bends, it gives a glow to the skin, due to the gush of blood to the face.

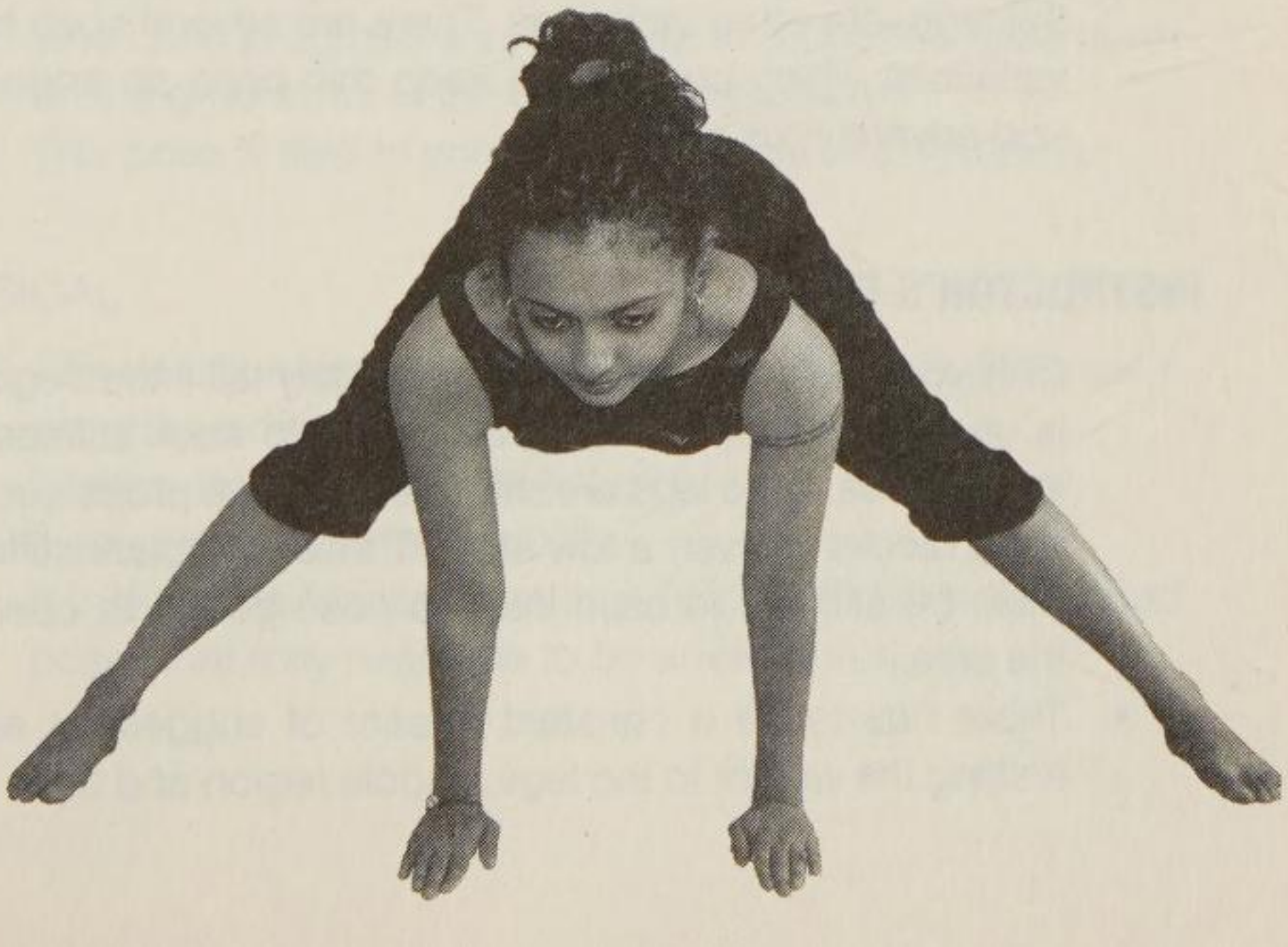
ADVANCED VARIATION

PRASARITA PADOTTANASANA

(WIDE-LEGGED FORWARD STRETCH, STANDING)

METHOD

- Stand up straight, with the legs spread as wide as is comfortable.
- Both feet are pointed ahead.
- Inhale to raise your hands high up in air, extending the spine.
- Exhale, lowering both hands down to reach for the floor. Beginners may not be able to reach that low, but it is better to reach as far as is possible without bending the knees.
- Push the hips back, shifting the weight to the legs. Hold this as long as is comfortable, breathing normally.
- Look ahead while holding the pose.
- To release the pose, work the feet together first, then lift both hands back up, and drop them to the sides. You may also place the palms firmly on the ground and jump both feet lightly back together. This involves confidence and enjoying a state of lightness with the body.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with severe lower back problems may keep the hands ahead, mid-air, instead of dropping them to floor, and push back the hips. They must learn to shift muscular effort, and focus on the legs and the hips instead of the spine.

PROGRESS IN THE POSE

- The ability to reach the hands to the floor is the first stage of progress.
- Next is the ability to shift the weight to the legs, the hips and the saddle region, from the hands. Most beginners will put intense pressure on their arms and hands initially. Shifting weight is a function of how physically adept they are and if they are refining awareness about fine muscular co-ordination.
- This pose has exciting levels of progress, for instance, dipping the spine low, so as to place elbows on the ground instead of the hands.
- Placing the palms at the feet or at the ankles is another stage and calls for the ability to balance. It also requires strength and flexibility in the legs.
- Moving the hands flat on the ground, between and behind the legs, are other variations. There are several such hand variations which continue to keep this pose an engaging and adventurous one.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Only you, the instructor, can immediately tell if the beginner is unable to reach for the ground due to back stiffness or leg stiffness. If the legs are stiff, you may give props such as yoga blocks or even a low stool. Those with back stiffness must be allowed to ease into the pose gently, to open up the area.
- There has to be a constant stream of suggestion about shifting the weight to the legs, saddle region and hips.

- The suggestion to push the back of the knees is very crucial too. This ensures that the legs remain straight; it also encourages the shift of weight.
- You need to be alert to the fact that some students, in their eagerness to deepen the pose, may bend the knees. This has to be corrected.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This variation is grounding, calming and eases tense muscles in the lower back and legs, thus relieving stress.
- It promotes playfulness, a sense of adventure and a desire to learn.
- It fights boredom (that may be experienced in other standing poses) since one's awareness must shift across the body to hold the pose with ease.
- It promotes mental and physical stamina, which in turn builds confidence.

PSYCHIC

- The difference between the early pose and this one is that the latter works on the crown chakra. This is particularly true when one progresses in the pose to place the head down on the ground, as in the case of a headstand.
- This pose is said to encourage vairagya or dispassion.

PHYSICAL

- This variation brings benefits similar to the early pose, but it provides a deeper workout to the legs and hips.
- It helps one gain physical balance.
- It encourages overall flexibility.
- It makes one fearless and thus helps with other advanced poses that may need one to be adventurous.

CHAPTER 2:
INTERMEDIARY ASANAS

This section deals with intermediary poses which are preparatory as well as 'break' poses. Some are counter-poses, which means you use them to flex muscles in the direction opposite to the one you took in an earlier pose. That is explained in detail below.

Though they appear to play second fiddle to the main poses, intermediary poses should not be taken lightly. They are complete in themselves and may form an intrinsic part of the main practice. In fact, a deceptively simple pose like the cat pose (marjarasana) can become extremely challenging if the breath is retained in the second stage of the asana and all three classical yoga locks (called bandhas) are held. It becomes particularly difficult when the number of times you do this is increased.

The dolphin pose prepares you for the headstand. I believe that in terms of muscular effort it can be more challenging than the headstand, for in the case of the latter, the main problem most people face is of co-ordination. The dolphin pose, furthermore, can lead you into other advanced practices such as the scorpion.

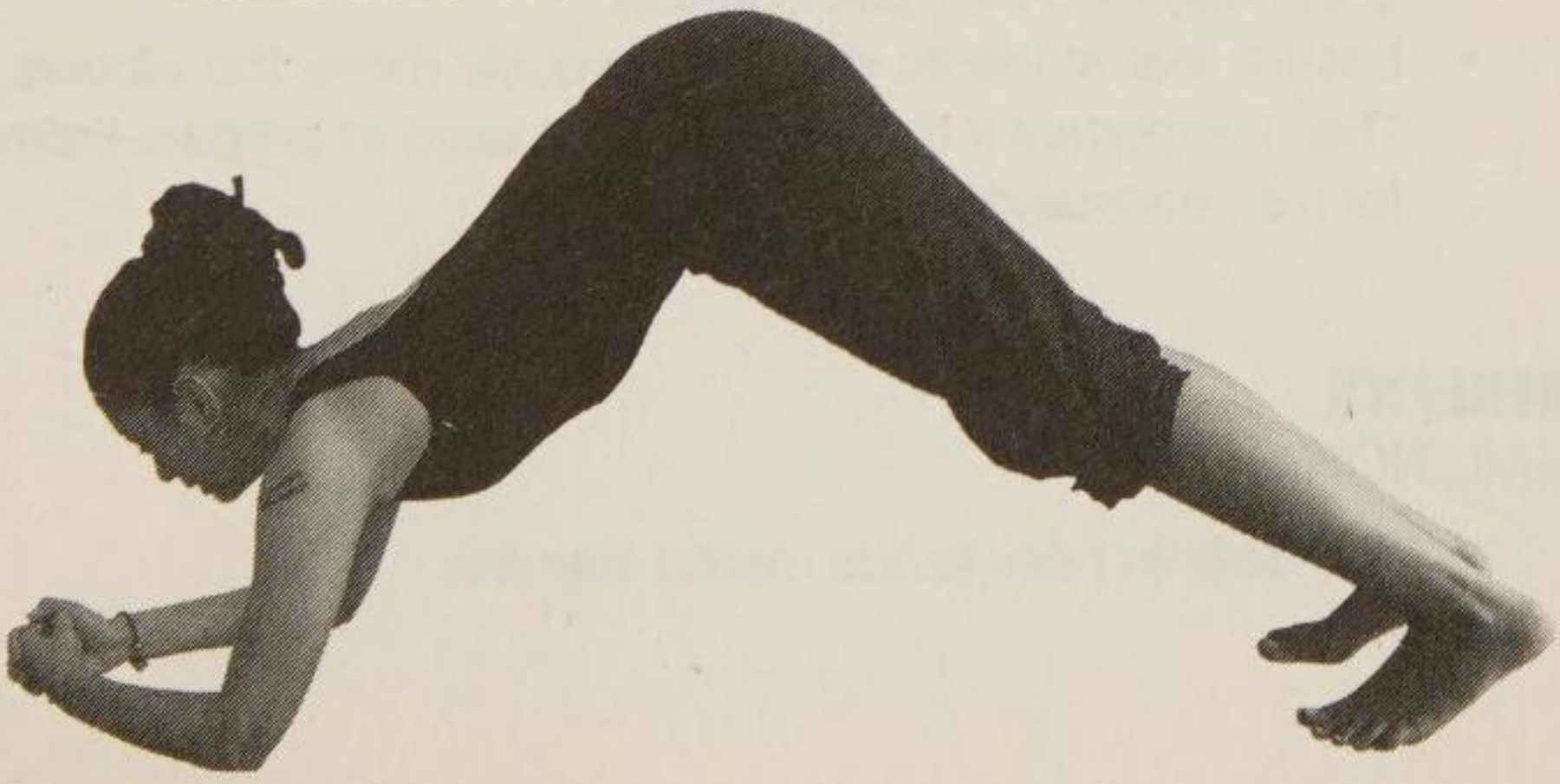
SISULASANA

(DOLPHIN POSE)

This is the best preparatory pose for the headstand. It displays all the main features of the headstand barring the lift-off. It prepares the shoulders by intensely challenging them. It trains the elbows so they stay in position. Often this is a main mistake beginners make in a headstand – they have wobbly elbows that can topple them over. The dolphin pose shuts off this nervous reflex. It is a complete pose in itself and may be practised by those wishing to gain upper body strength.

METHOD

- Sit on knees.
- Cup the hands at the elbows, as for the headstand.
- Lean forward to place the elbows on the ground, ahead of you.
- Fixing the elbows where they are, lift the knees off the ground.
- Walk the feet a few inches ahead.



- Inhale.
- Exhaling, draw the head over the hands, as in a classic push-up.
- Look ahead.
- Inhale, draw the head back, still looking ahead.
- This is one round. Do this 10 to 15 times.
- You may increase the rounds gradually.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- The same as in the case of the headstand.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- You may walk the feet ahead or behind. Keeping the feet behind can be comparatively tougher since it draws you closer to the ground faster. However you can shift the challenge and play around with it, by moving the feet.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Students may keep their feet too far back. To do push-ups from such a position may be tough for those with weak shoulders. You must encourage the students to adjust the position of their feet, according to their personal comfort, so the pose holds.
- The student must be encouraged to keep the feet slightly apart, again so the pose is stable.
- Ensure that students do not nervously move the elbows. This is important if the pose is being used to prepare them for the headstand.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The dolphin pose builds mental stamina.

PSYCHIC

- The dolphin pose works on the anahata chakra.
- It also works on the manipura chakra.

PHYSICAL

- The dolphin pose provides a complete body workout and builds physical stamina.
- It tones the upper body, arms, hips and legs.
- It improves breathing by intensifying the demands made on the respiratory process.

BALASANA

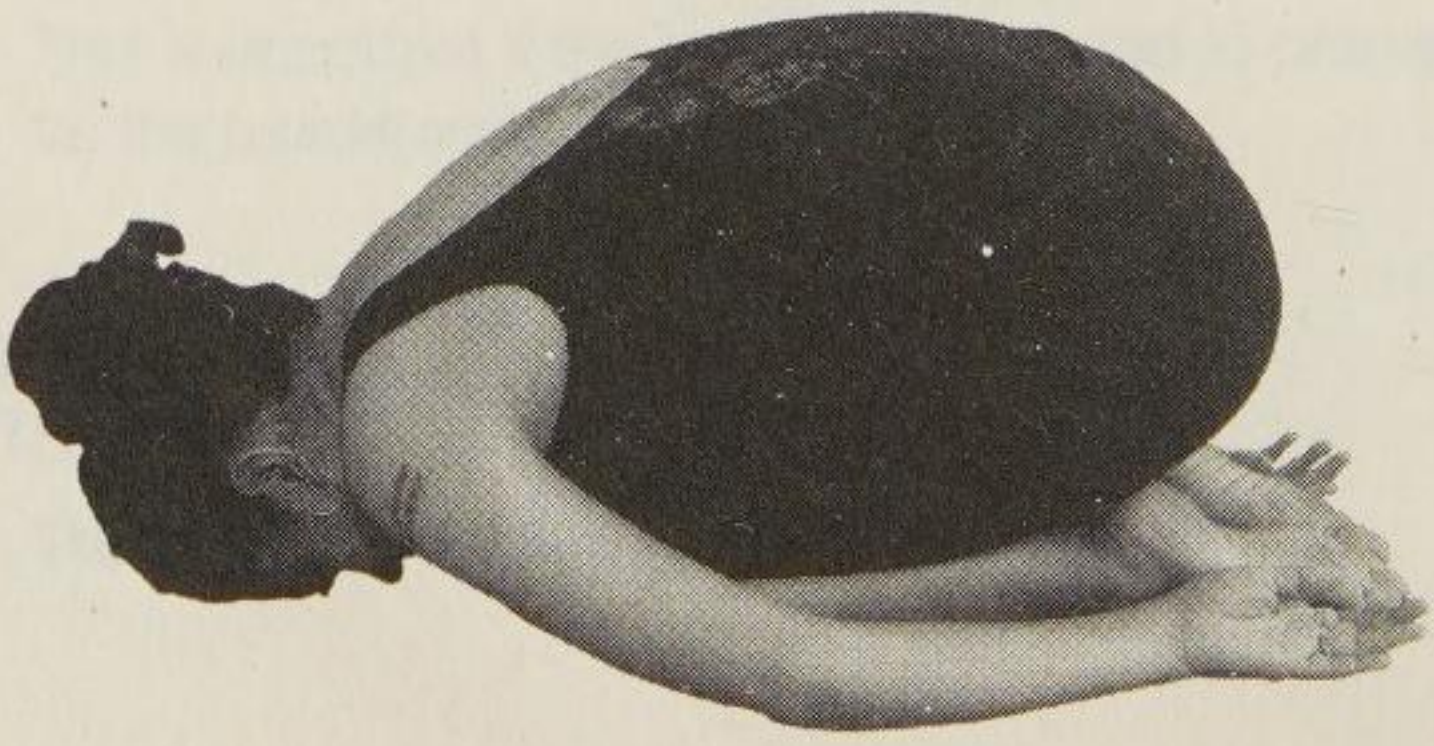
(CHILD POSE)

This pose is an ideal follow-up to the headstand. One is also advised to practise this before the headstand, so one is prepared for the gush of blood to the head that is to follow.

The child pose can be done after the camel pose or other taxing kneeling poses or backbends. It is deeply relaxing and is one of the best forward-bends, especially since it does not strain beginners the way other poses do.

METHOD

- Sit on your heels. Inhale.
- Exhale. Bend your torso from the waist, to place the forehead on ground.
- Place your arms close to and alongside the body, palms turned up.
- Rest for a while, breathing normally till you feel the shoulders and upper back relax. Stay this way as long as is comfortable.
- Raise the head back to the normal position.



- If the neck continues to feel strained (post a headstand it may, if you are new to inversions), after sitting straight back up, roll your neck gently, clockwise, then anticlockwise.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Avoid the child pose if you have knee problems.
- Also the pose may aggravate lower backache.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Ensure that your heels are flared out, and the big toes are lightly touching from the inside.
- It is important for the hips to settle down on the heels. However, beginners may feel that this is not possible till they achieve spinal flexibility. One may use a folded mat, towel or cushion between the heels and hips.
- It is important for the forehead to touch the ground. Again, it may difficult in the beginning. Keeping a cushion at the forehead may somewhat facilitate this, and help deepen the sense of relaxation this pose comes with.
- The benefits of a pose like this are best experienced when held for a long time. If you are not using this as a break pose, but wish to use it to de-stress, you may practise it for up to two or three minutes at a time.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, you need to check the position of the student's heels, to ensure that it is just right, not too wide.
- Also emphasize that is more important for the heel to touch the hip, rather than the forehead to the ground. Most students will over-reach, attempt the latter and ignore the former. The benefits of this pose are most evident when heel-hip contact is achieved. This is because the pressure here is said to activate an acupressure point – vajra nadi in yogic parlance – that heals the whole body.

- Giving constant references to the way this pose may be deepened or enjoyed will further heighten a sense of relaxation. Often, beginners are restless while practising relaxation poses and prefer to become active. This restlessness can be curtailed if the benefits of the pose get repeated even as they hold it.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The child pose prepares the ankles for more advanced meditative poses, like the lotus.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This pose is soothing, and releases stress.
- It helps treat anger and panic attacks.
- It is calming and controls hyperactivity.

PSYCHIC

- This pose has an impact on the manipura chakra.
- It also has a bearing on the ajna chakra.
- This is a pose of complete and abject surrender. When you sit long enough in it, a meditative state is induced, and the negative patterns that control your life become clear. This pose prepares the mind for the austere and difficult task of watching itself.

PHYSICAL

- The child pose is a supremely relaxing asana. Since the breath becomes deeper than otherwise while in this pose, the sense of relaxation heightens.
- It softly stretches the spine, and is more relieving than most other poses since it does not ask for a lot of effort.
- The brain is also soothed and refreshed by the downward movement of the blood.

- In stressful situations, there is reduced blood flow to the brain. This gets rectified with a pose like this.
- Heel-hip contact is said to activate the large, wandering parasympathetic vagus nerve which switches on all the repairing systems in the body at once.
- It helps heal most digestive disorders.
- It can control diabetes by exerting pressure at the abdomen.
- The face gets a great yoga glow due to the flush of blood.

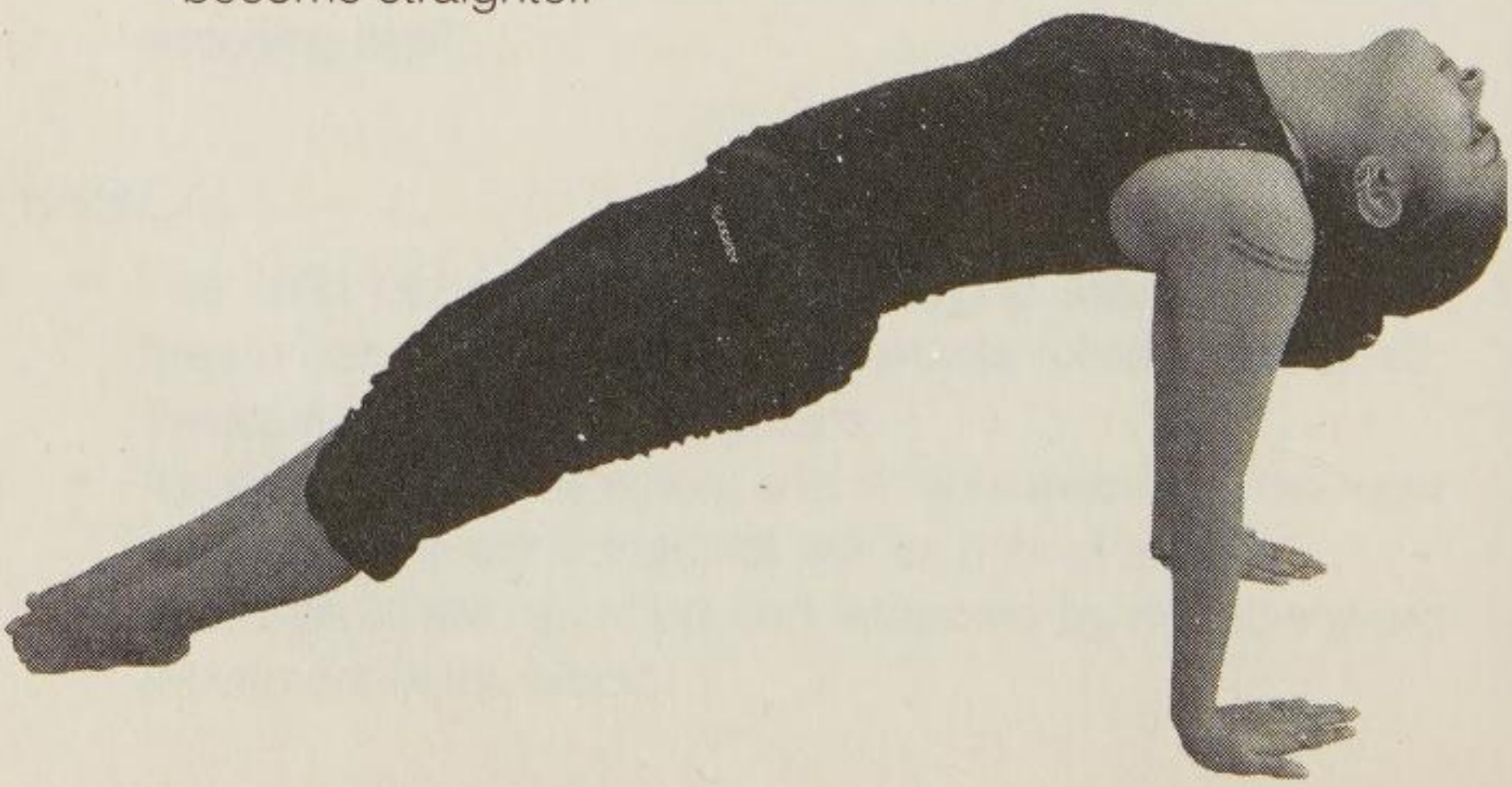
SETUASANA

(PLANK POSE)

Setuasana or the plank pose is used as a counter-pose for seated forward-bends. It is a very intense asana that builds physical stamina and prepares the shoulders for several advanced poses.

METHOD

- Sit on the mat with the legs out in the front, and feet together.
- Place the palms beside the hips, fingers pointed to the back. (Some people with weak wrists or tight shoulders may prefer to place the fingers pointed ahead. This may be allowed.)
- Inhale deeply. Exhale.
- Inhaling, lift the hips off the ground.
- Simultaneously drop the neck gently back.
- Continue breathing, to push hips up further, so the legs become straighter.



- Also, push the toes down, so as to keep feet flat on the ground.
- Hold for five to eight breaths.
- Exhale, to drop hips back to starting position.
- Lie down on the stomach in the crocodile or the corpse pose.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- This pose is not to be attempted by those with weak shoulders or wrists, heart problems, inflammatory conditions, neck problems or vertigo.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Most people will hold this pose loosely with the hips low. Sometimes this may be due to an upper back weakness, in which case liberties may be allowed till strength is enhanced. However, if the pose is not held firmly due to a lack of awareness, the error must be rectified by lifting the hips higher.
- The legs may be bent at the knees. This must be corrected. Keeping the legs straight is what makes this pose a complete body workout.
- A fear of dropping the neck may impel some students to keep their heads awkwardly raised. This can further strain the neck. Dropping the head gently back will actually relax it.
- Again, even very advanced students may forget about or not be aware of their toes' position. They will hold the toes up. This will actually reduce the upward lift the hips. Pointing the toes down, so the feet go flat on the mat will improve the posture and tone of the legs.
- This pose is infamous for giving a sudden cramp to a beginner. The end to the pose must therefore be gentle so as to not move any body part suddenly.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- As the instructor, make it a point to constantly repeat the fine corrections; this will help the student subconsciously bring in the changes needed.
- You may have to gently place your hands on the student's toes to move them ahead. This is because some students feel disoriented (which is natural when the head falls back or the neck is involved) and not know whether they are moving the toes ahead or behind.
- Some beginners may experience a sudden, intense cramp while holding this pose. A cramp always feels like a major attack. Under such circumstances, ideally, the student should be told to just lie down to allow the cramp to pass. This facilitates the movement of blood sugar to various body parts and muscles (which cramp when there is no fuel) and helps relieve the cramp.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- This pose develops the rotational strength needed to hold asanas like the wheel.

BENEFITS

PSYCHIC

- This pose works on the manipura chakra, and helps build confidence in timid people.

EMOTIONAL

- This is a stimulating pose and wakes up the lethargic mind.
- It boosts mental stamina and strength.
- It fights fatigue and tiredness.
- It helps treat depression.

PHYSICAL

- This pose builds stamina and provides a complete body workout.
- It makes the back strong, and tones and strengthens the spine.
- It tones the neck, ankles, arms, hips, ankles and the back of the legs superbly.
- It strengthens the digestive system due to the intense stretch it provides.

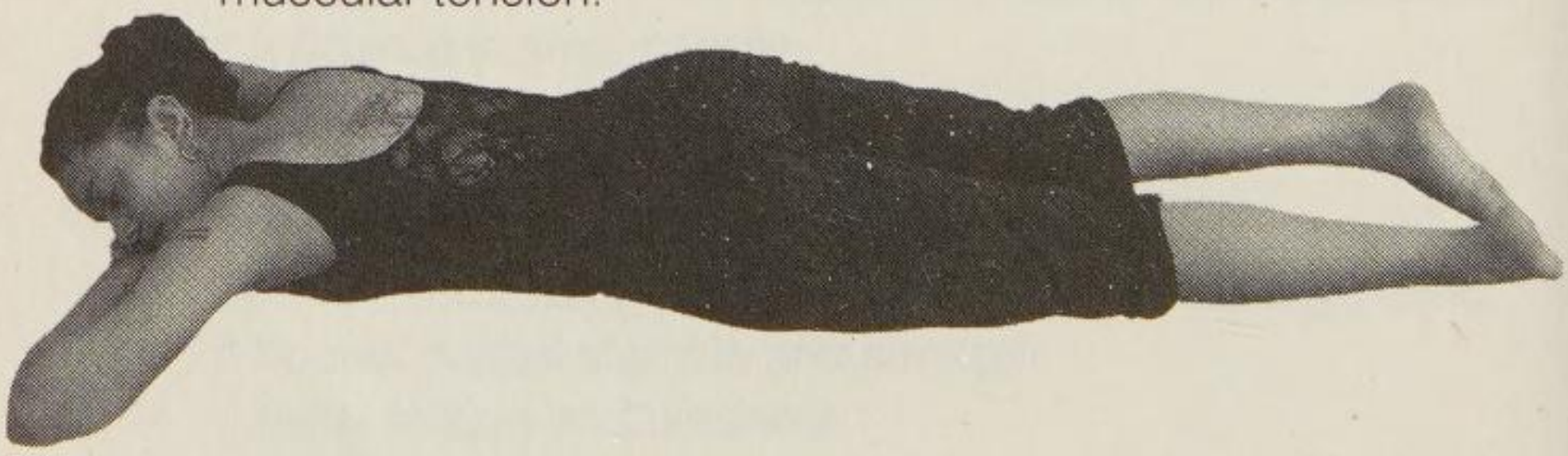
MAKARASANA

(CROCODILE POSE)

This pose helps the body rejuvenate and is highly relaxing. Since the practitioner resembles a crocodile resting on the banks of a river, the asana is called makarasana or the crocodile pose.

METHOD

- Lie on your stomach.
- Stack one hand over the order. (If this asana is acting as a relaxation pose between backbends, do switch hands, so that both are equally used.)
- Place the right cheek on the back of the hands (or the right temple may be placed).
- Bring the feet together, so the big toes are touching lightly and the heels are flared.
- Rest till you feel your breath deepen and can let go of all muscular tension.



FINE CORRECTIONS

- Sometimes those with knee or lower back problems may

find that bringing the feet together is difficult. It is better then to keep the feet apart.

- As suggested, the hands must be switched so that one hand alone is not favoured. This is important since the right side of the body is said to be linked to the left brain and vice versa. Switching the hands with awareness will engage both brain hemispheres in the course of your practice.
- The ideal point of focus must be the belly, since the breath deepens as the diaphragm relaxes. This furthers the relaxation quotient.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The crocodile pose is calming and soothing.

PSYCHIC

- The pose works on the manipura chakra.

PHYSICAL

- This pose is deeply relaxing, since it makes us breathe through the belly.
- It deepens breath, and helps those with respiratory problems and anxiety disorders.
- The crocodile pose tones the spine.
- It heals back issues, especially problems in the lower back.
- It helps cure digestive problems due to the pressure it exerts on the spine.

MARJARIASANA

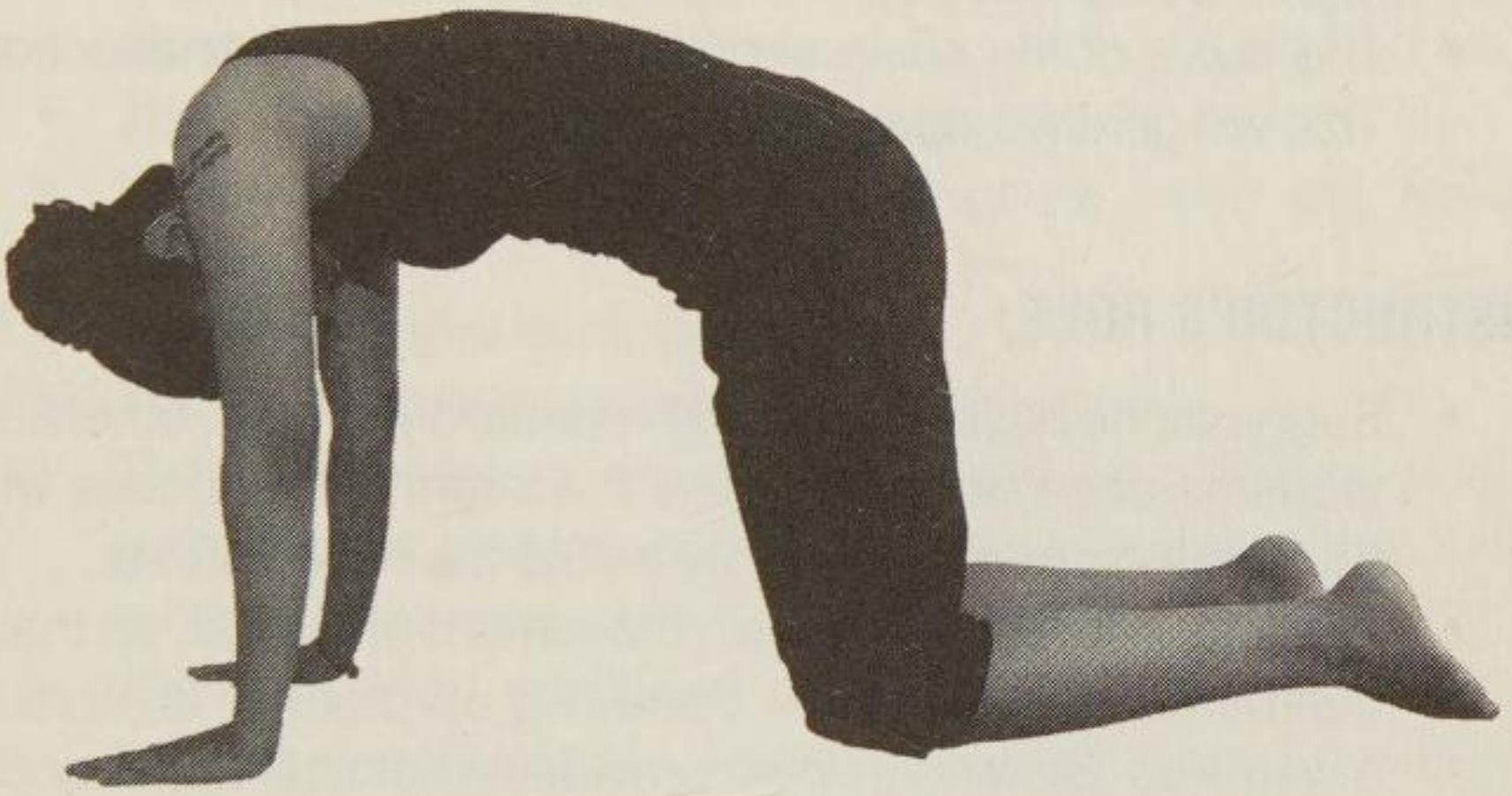
(CAT STRETCH POSE)

There are several, possibly hundreds of versions of the cat stretch. This is a classic pose and is ideal if one wishes to relieve the strain of backbends. It provides a counter stretch and opens up contracted muscles, so that the stress of attempting backbends does not linger on.

METHOD

- Go on your fours.
- Place your palms flat on the ground directly under your shoulders.

- Turn the toes in. Ensure either hand is in line with the knee or foot on that side.
- Inhale and raise the head up.
- Simultaneously, drop the spine down, creating a curve.
- Exhale, and drop the head down, so it gets locked between the collar bones.



- Simultaneously curve the spine up (as a stretching cat would), lock the stomach tightly in, and also the pelvic muscles.
- This is one round.
- Release with an inhalation, and look up.
- You may repeat this three to five times.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- The cat stretch pose should not be attempted by those with severe knee pain.
- Those with epilepsy should learn this pose in a phased manner.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- In the first stage, when the spine drops down, the stretch should be felt intensely up to the hip region. Most people

soften this already soft pose. This will dilute the toning that the pose can offer.

- The arms have to be taut in the second stage of the pose.
- While locking the pelvic muscles, stomach and chin, you may hold your breath to intensify the pose. However breath retention is not recommended for those with very high blood pressure.
- The curve of the spine should be deep, in either direction. This will gently prepare you for other backbends.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Suggestions have to be made repeatedly by you, otherwise students often do not practise the intermediary poses with the same enthusiasm as they would the main asanas.
- You may phase the up-down movement of the cat, so that it can be either fast or slow. Speeding up practice is more of a warm-up. Slowing it down provides relief after backbends, and is also more meditative.
- The cat stretch may also be used as a gentle break between more intense poses.
- If the cat stretch is to act as a counter-pose, it may attempted just a few times. If it is to be one of the main asanas, then the duration of each stage should be longer and may be done 10 or more times.
- The chin lock is often slackly held by students. But you cannot spot this since the lock curves inwards. To gauge if the pose is being held correctly, you need to focus on the upward curve of the spine. This is a good indicator of the effectiveness of the chin lock. A deep curve upwards indicates that the chin is lodged in well.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This pose is soothing and de-stressing.
- It relieves muscles stressed by emotions, especially those in the neck.

PSYCHIC

- The cat stretch pose works on the swadhistana chakra, and clears all blockages here.

PHYSICAL

- It is one of the most therapeutic poses, and is used to treat most chronic ailments.
- The cat stretch pose boosts respiration.
- It softly stretches the spine and gently tones the spinal nerves.
- It relieves upper back tension also.
- The stomach lock tones the digestive system.
- The pose relieves menstrual cramps and works on the reproductive system, healing problems in that region. It is among the few poses recommended during menses.
- The chin lock works on the thyroid gland, and has a bearing on metabolism. Hence this pose helps with weight management.
- Due to its impact on the voice box, it sweetens the voice and keeps it younger.

SHAVASANA

(CORPSE POSE)

This is a very important pose for relaxation and meditation, though it is often used merely as an intermediary asana between more intense or physically challenging ones. Ideally, it must be practised at the beginning and end of any intense session, be it pranayama or asana practice. The duration should be a minimum of five minutes and it can go up to any length; ideally it should be proportionate to the duration of the entire practice. In a long class, one should devote 10 to 15 minutes of time to this pose.

The corpse pose is a great way of draining off muscular effort, cooling down and relaxing. One leaves the mat feeling refreshed instead of strained or stressed.

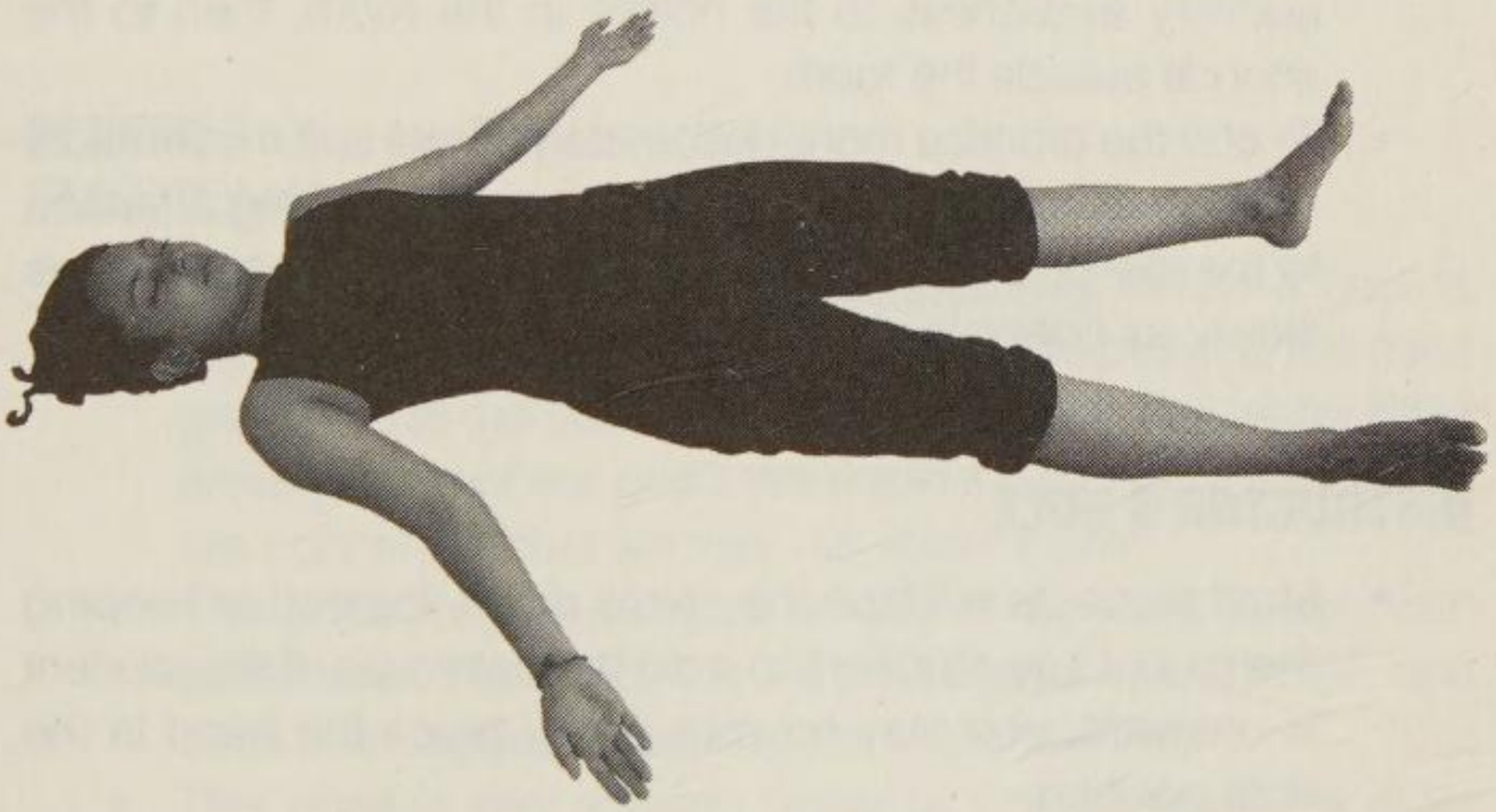
Before any session, the corpse pose allows you to block out or shed external stressors. Once this is done, your attention will rest more comfortably on your body, and you will remain meditative. If you rush into the class and breathlessly try the more complex asanas, without devoting time to the corpse pose, you will miss the healing impact of yoga.

METHOD

- Lie down supine on the mat.
- The arms are away, approximately 40 degrees off the body.
- The legs are spread out lightly, approximately 40 degrees away from each other.
- Relax the body deliberately, either by actually tightening and relaxing each part (for instance, clenching the fists to render

the hands tense, and relaxing the fists), or by mentally becoming aware of each part of the body and relaxing it.

- Settle down after covering the length of the body in this fashion, and mentally watch the movement of your breath. Wait for it to relax. After sometime you will begin to enjoy a greater degree of muscular relaxation.
- Stay like this for five minutes or so.
- To end the practice, stretch both hands overhead, bringing the palms together. Bring the feet together to stretch the legs. Make this into an intense stretch; this itself is called stick pose (yastikasana).
- Release the stretch. Roll over and sit up.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- While a short nidra is okay for everybody, those with clinical depression must avoid a longer one since it may aggravate their condition.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- Do not spread the arms and legs too wide. This will stretch the muscles instead of relaxing them.
- Try not to fidget. The idea is for all movement to stop till you can relax completely.

- Keep the eyes shut.
- Try not to fall asleep. Be awake and alert yet relaxed.
- Instead of allowing the mind to wander, try to move it over the various parts of the body progressively, so that these become more relaxed. This stage of the practice is in itself a meditative one and is called yoga nidra or the sleep of yoga. It can last for over an hour for those who need deep relaxing meditation as a part of their healing.
- Always leave the practice by deliberately turning the mind's attention outward, moving gently from an inner physical experience to one that is external. For example, while you may begin by hearing the sound of your breath, shift such auditory awareness to the noises in the room, then to the sounds outside the room.
- To end the practice more deliberately, make soft movements with the extreme ends of your body before shifting attention to the rest of it. It is best to emerge from the corpse pose as slowly as possible.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Most students will face the palms down, instead of keeping them up. Urge students to hold the palms up. If the student is unaware, you may have to gently place the hand in the right position.
- If you are providing cues for progressive body relaxation it is better to do so without moving or creating sudden noises. Any movement or articulation can come as a shock to someone who is deeply relaxed. Students can develop a headache from a poorly done corpse pose or a badly executed call for progressive body relaxation.
- Though corrections may be made in the initial part of the practice, they should not be done later, when a student is relaxing deeply. Any abrupt correction could shock those who have settled into a meditative state.
- Ensure that there are no outside distractions or sudden sounds coming during this stage. Ensure students have

switched off their mobiles. Or if there is a door bell, that it is also switched off. Trying to anticipate such noises and keeping them under control will protect your students from the jarring shock they may experience if there is any disturbance.

- Those with serious emotional problems or personal issues may become tearful during this practice. Quiet tears could roll off, following which the student will feel better having found an outlet to suppressed emotions. You may signal her, asking her to go the washroom to clean up. I always keep tissues in my classes for such eventualities.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This pose may be used for goal-setting. When a goal is visualized at the beginning and end of the practice the mind gets used to the possibility of the end being met without any anxiety. Most of our goals are riddled with fears because we are concerned that we may not reach them!
- This pose may be used as a kind of hypnosis to deal with addictions. Here too, the introduction of visualization and cues that suggest dropping the habit may help.
- This pose is very relaxing because it shuts down the inner chatter of the subconscious mind and helps the anxious or angry part of our subconscious release intense feelings. It is extremely healing.

PSYCHIC

- The corpse pose is an intense meditative practice in itself, working on the ajna chakra.

PHYSICAL

- The corpse pose is very relaxing and de-stressing.
- It is the ideal practice pose and if done properly lowers

blood lactate levels (which build up when we do intense physical activity).

- It is a most powerful healing practice for people wishing to fight chronic ailments, especially those that may have psychosomatic causes.

CHAPTER 3:
PRANAYAMA

Pranayama in Sanskrit means breathing practices that expand the life force. Its significance is evident. Unfortunately, there are several reasons why most yoga classes completely bypass this most important practice.

A common reason is that, though it is easy to practise, providing instructions becomes very difficult and disorienting for the teacher. Also, though pranayama is very powerful, it is simple to do and therefore does not interest or excite students the way a headstand would. This is especially true of students who are just beginning yoga. They may indicate that they are bored by lying back or actually going to the instructor before or after a class to express their ennui, or their desire to be excused from practice. This can intimidate an instructor, especially if she is paying a huge studio fee for running classes!

The third and more interesting reason for its exclusion is classical. Some traditionalists make the case that since pranayama is listed fourth in the eight limbs of yoga, it should not be taught to those who are not advanced practitioners with a long and steady relationship with asanas. This point is not valid, simply because by that logic even asanas may not be taught to those who have not mastered the first two limbs of yoga – yamas and niyamas – which place an emphasis on the personal and disciplinary practices of hygiene and etiquette; indeed, yamas and niyamas call for extreme control! Moreover, it's debatable if an instructor can even make a judgment call on something as tenuous as personal behaviour.

My own understanding is that all the limbs of yoga may be simultaneously practised, so each helps and powers the

other. To use the list of the eight limbs chronologically may be counterproductive for all concerned, the teacher as well as the student. Here is why:

1. In the case of advanced poses, especially the headstand, enthusiasm, fear, excitement, anxiety, over-exertion, or the wrong type of exertion may come in the way of practice, particularly if the student is a novice. But regular attempts at pranayama – which works on the nervous system – will help one step back from the rush of emotions.
2. Even advanced students tend to hold their breath while trying difficult advanced variations. Pranayama can help them either hold the pose despite breath control (because of a step called kumbhaka or retention), or help them breathe despite the muscular effort it asks for. Pranayama as a result speeds up the progress of learning and practice overall.
3. Also, pranayama protects you from the inflammatory response the body may have after an excessively long round of asana practice. Even those with superb posture and amazing flexibility are prone to odd illnesses, and pranayama helps one heal. In the event of an injury from over-exertion or the wrong kind of exertion, pranayama protects one and acts as a shield.

KAPALABHATI PRANAYAMA

(SKULL CLEANSING PRACTICE)

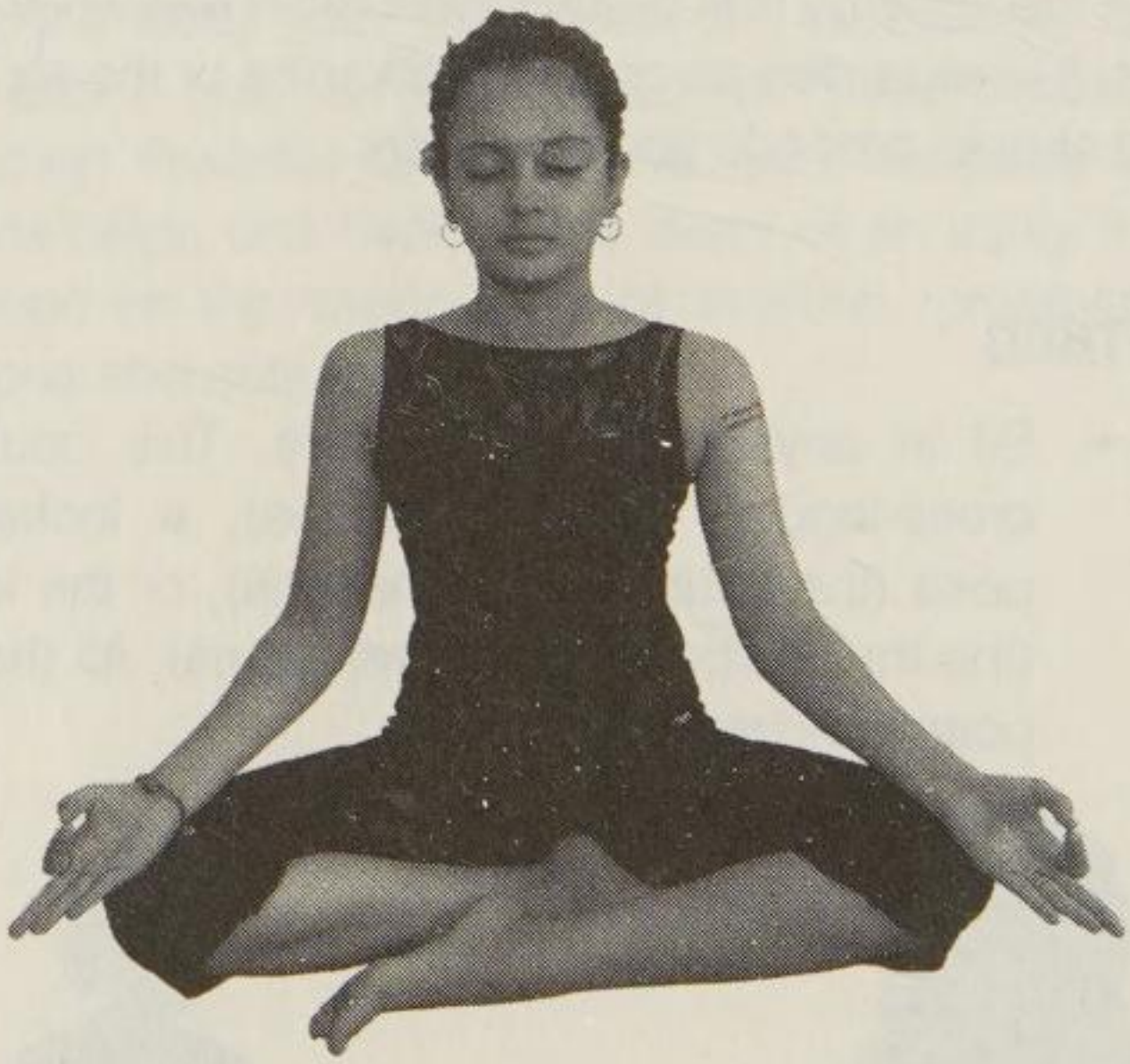
Traditionally this is regarded as a kriya, or a cleansing and preparatory practice. Hence it may be attempted before the asanas, for it warms up the insides and clears the nostrils for advanced pranayama and asanas.

The skull cleansing practice excites the mind and heightens right brain activity, so keen anticipation replaces fear. It also helps fight the lethargy that practitioners often feel while getting on to the mat. It is regarded as part of shatkarma or the six cleansing rituals that should precede yoga practice.

METHOD

- Sit in any meditative posture. This could be a simple cross-legged pose (sukasana), a locked cross-legged pose (the lotus or padamasana), or the kneeling position (the thunderbolt pose or vajrasana). All these are classical poses and well known.

- Place the hands in a mudra or a yogic hand gesture. A universal one is the chin mudra (the hand gesture of pure consciousness), where the tip of the index finger is touching tip of the thumb. Let each hand display this mudra. Place the back of the hands on the thighs or at either knee.
- Inhale and exhale deeply twice.
- After the third inhalation, hyperventilate vigorously on every exhalation. This is usually done best when an instructor is giving the counts or when a tape is providing cues in the background, so you do not have to count yourself. Complete 60 hyperventilations like this.
- Then wait to catch a few deep, normal breaths.
- After the third inhalation, hold the breath gently, with light pressure at the stomach, by drawing it in. If you are a newcomer to the skull cleansing practice you may initially want to hold your breath for 15 seconds or so. If you are an advanced student, you may hold it for upto 60 to 75 seconds.



- Exhale deeply, releasing the soft lock at the stomach. Now inhale. This completes one round.
- In personal practice you may attempt three to five rounds.
- This pranayama is usually followed by alternate nostril breathing.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with respiratory problems or weak breath capacity are likely to feel dizzy initially. In such cases, it is best to learn the skull cleansing practice in a phased manner with expert guidance. Since it helps strengthen the lungs and cures respiratory problems, it must not be avoided because of early difficulties.
- The practice though is to be avoided by those suffering from vertigo and must be learned in a phased manner after the problem has been controlled with regular asana practice (especially balancing poses.)
- The skull cleansing practice tends to spike blood pressure. So those with high BP too need to learn it in a phased manner. Ideally they can start once the blood pressure normalizes through regular asana practice. Those with heart and blood circulation problems have to keep this in mind especially and in severe cases it is advisable to avoid it altogether.
- Because the practice affects the nervous system, those with epilepsy need to learn it similarly – in a phased manner and after regular asana practice.
- This practice is best avoided by those with any inflammatory condition, including fever and ulcers, inner bleeding or organ weaknesses.

FINE CORRECTIONS

- It is best not to fidget during pranayama, and hold one seated posture throughout. This may be difficult for those unused to sitting in a cross-legged position, or those who have niggling aches in the back, knees or hips. In such cases, it is best to wait to complete at least one round before any movement is initiated. This will also set the discipline of maintaining a steady posture – one of the most important features of classical yoga.
- Try not to scrunch the face. It will create wrinkles or the feeling of anxiety or anger.

- Place the hands so the palms are facing up and remember to hold the mudra continuously.
- It is best if the spine is held erect, but not painfully stiff.
- If need be, and if the instructor allows it, use a wall to ease any spinal discomfort or lower back problem. A hard cushion to sit on will also ease problems in the spine (especially the lower back) and the knees.
- Never over-exert during pranayama.
- You may progressively increase the number of hyperventilations over a few months to 120 in each round, with breath retention increasing to a minute or 75 seconds. This may only be done when practice is daily, regular and intense.
- Keep the eyes shut throughout. It is said to prevent the leakage of energy through the eyes (the source of all distraction).
- It is important to enter any pranayama with the right attitude (thinking of the benefits is a good way) since it is said that what you feel while starting the practice will become exaggerated and heightened as you progress.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- Maintaining a structured method of counting is very essential. The counts must be the same for all rounds.
- At the start of any round, encourage the students to practise one sequence of deep inhalation-exhalation. Otherwise hyperventilation will unconsciously make the students feel anxious.
- The suggestion that one must not over-exert oneself must be made constantly during any pranayama. Since pranayama works on the fragile alveoli (air sacs in the lungs) these can get damaged if the wrong kind of exertion is used.
- The suggestion must also be made to contain hyperventilation at the nostril. Most people tend to scrunch their facial muscles while doing the skull cleansing ritual. This can cause wrinkles as well bring disturbing emotions to the fore.

- Some students may wrongly swing or use their whole body during this practice, scrunching the shoulders, face and torso with each hyperventilation. A suggestion must be made to control overenthusiasm, and instead focus on soft hyperventilation. There will be a complementary movement at the stomach, but this should not be forced; it must happen naturally when the diaphragm moves in tandem with nostril movement.
- It is best to announce that the inhalation is automatic in this practice. Most practitioners become anxious if they feel they are only exhaling. This will create a state of high anxiety which is avoidable since all pranayama practices are said to exaggerate the feelings you have while entering them.
- The instructor must also observe if the students are holding the hand gesture well, with the palms facing upwards. The mudra is believed to lock the energy you create during pranayama. Keeping the hands slack also displays a lack of awareness which yoga seeks to dispel.
- Ideally corrections in the posture must not be done by the instructor during these practice sessions. The mind becomes still during the skull cleansing ritual. If the student feels a hand along her back or elsewhere, especially when her eyes are closed, she can have an intense and unpleasant reaction.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- Though a stimulating practice, this pranayama is said to steady the mind.
- It fights fatigue, lethargy and dullness.
- It revilatises the brain by creating a compression-release effect on brain fluid.
- As a cleansing shatkarma it is said to help contain a mind that wavers due to anger, desire, pride, sensuality or envy.
- It is used to address issues stemming from depression.

PSYCHIC

- This pranayama is believed to work on the sixth chakra, ajna, and especially helps stop delusional visions and nightmares.
- It is said to create the beautiful third quality called, in yogic parlance, sattva or purity.

PHYSICAL

- This practice prevents and controls respiratory problems, including sinusitis.
- It clears mucus.
- This practice expands lung capacity through what is called 'the vacuum effect'.
- The soft in-out pressure in the belly tones the stomach muscles. It also helps prevent and heal all digestive problems.
- It is used to treat headaches.
- It is said to power vision due to the delicate channels it clears within the skull and face.
- It makes the metabolism efficient.
- It helps with weight loss.
- This practice keeps you young by working gently on the facial muscles, and clearing inner pathways in the skull, including the sinus cavities. It is believed to reduce wrinkles.

ANULOM VILOM

(ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING)

Anulom vilom combines two words – anulom means the natural order, and vilom means the reversal of the natural order. So, though the more commonly used translation connotes the technique of alternate nostril breathing, the traditional meaning conveys the power that is loaded into this simple practice. Its classical name – nadi shodhana – means that which purifies energy channels, and this is what the practice actually does. Not surprisingly, it is a premeditative practice, that is, it may be done before meditation.

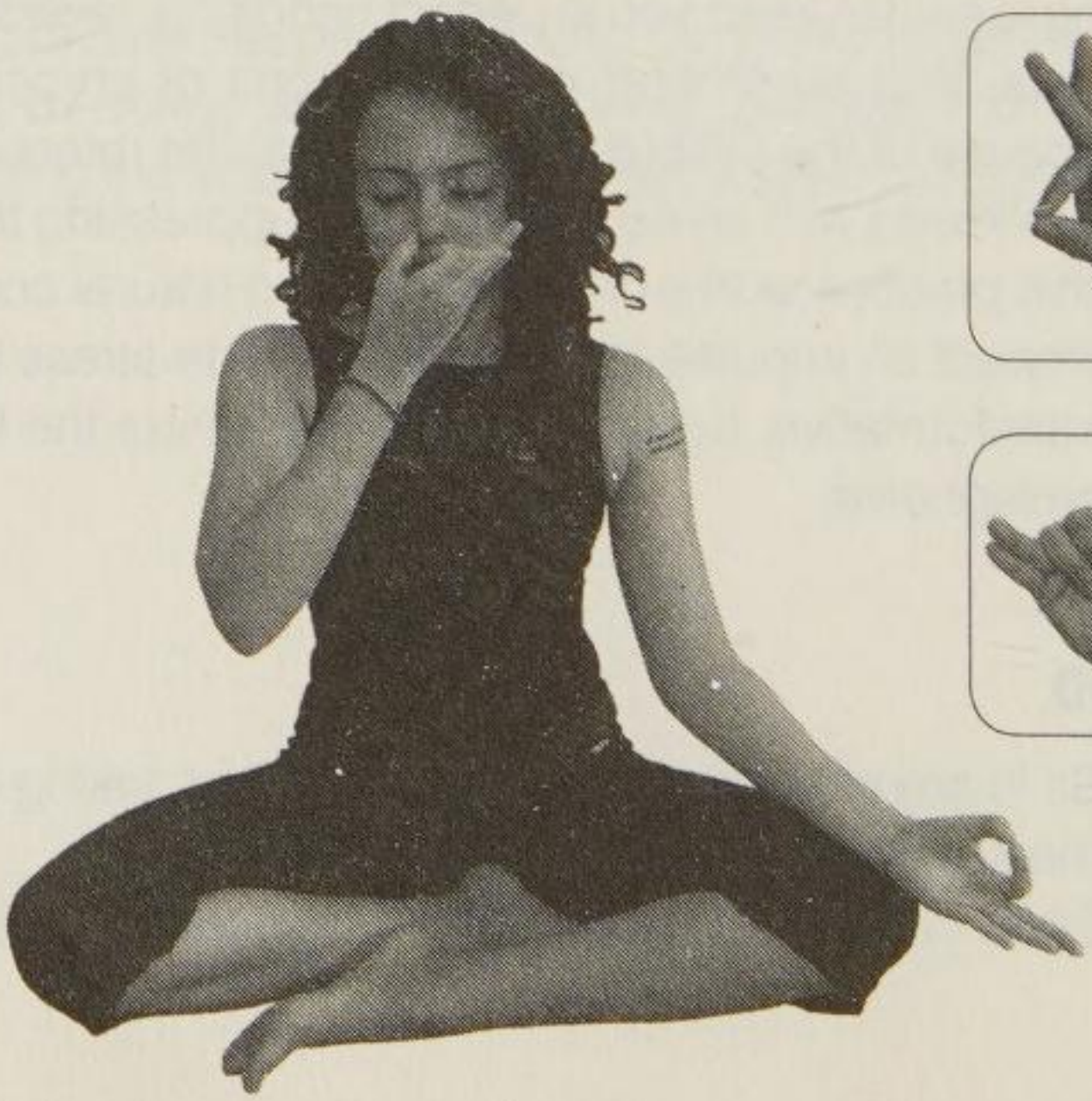
However this practice is often neglected or done in a disjointed way, with no attention paid to counts; this comes in the way of its effective implementation. If carried out properly, alternate nostril breathing is said to keep you in perfect condition, reversing the drag of ailments, and controlling even the worst of chronic diseases. Also, because of the difficult directive – that the retention of breath must be followed with an exhalation – by suppressing the instinct to inhale, this practice works on biological and natural conditioning. It has an impact on impulse control, acts as a de-stress tool and can be life-transformative. Equally, it helps harmonize the left and right brain hemispheres.

METHOD

- Sit in any chosen cross-legged position, taking care to keep the spine upright and the shoulders relaxed.
- Each hand is to be placed in a different mudra. If the left

hand is in the chin mudra, place the right in the Vishnu mudra with the index and the middle finger pressed down. The other fingers are used to shut and open the nostrils, as the practice starts.

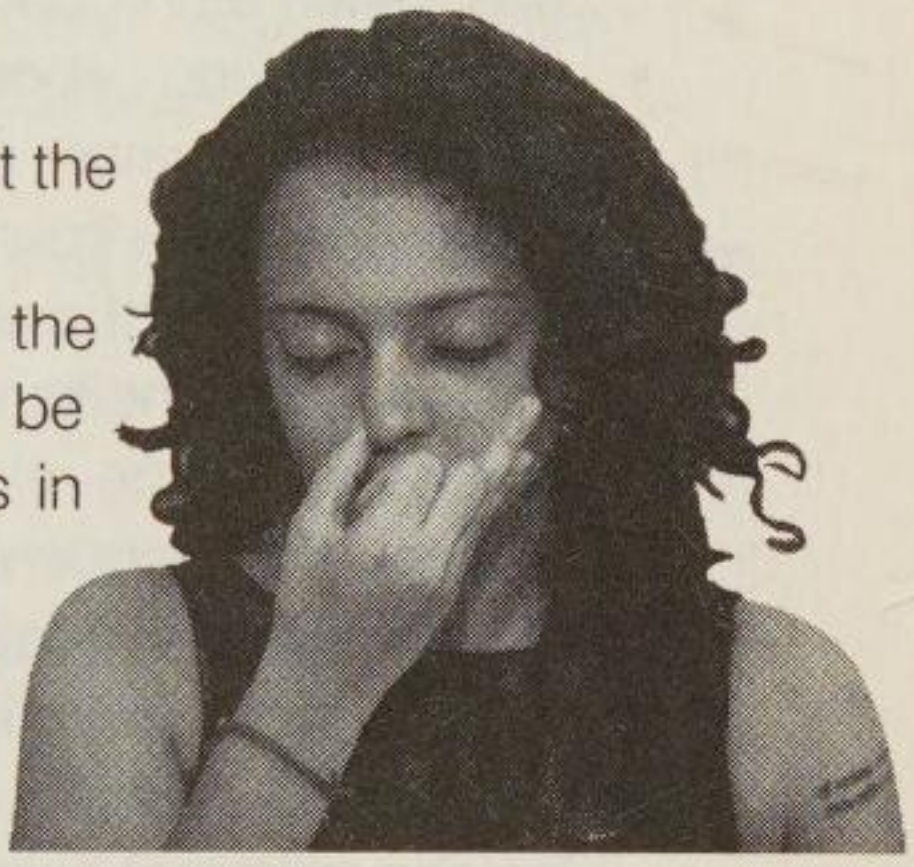
- Inhale and exhale deeply, twice.
- Then place the right thumb to the right nostril. Inhale from the left to a count of four.
- Retain the breath by holding the nostrils gently with the right thumb, ring and little finger. Hold for a count of 16.
- Lift the right thumb off the right nostril, to release from that nostril an exhalation to a count of eight.
- Inhale now from right nostril to a count of four.
- Retain, as above, to a count of 16.
- Release the right ring finger and little finger, to exhale from the left nostril to a count of eight.
- This completes a round. Do five rounds initially.
- Increase this to 10 rounds after a few weeks or whenever you are able to do this pranayama without discomfort. This calls for daily practice.
- After finishing the predetermined number of rounds, sit with your eyes shut for a while. Then take two deep normal breaths before finishing the practice.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- As such it is a very healing practice. However the regular ratio may seem high for beginners. You may use a modified one, till their lungs acclimatize to the regular ratio.

FINE CORRECTIONS



- Eyes should be shut throughout the practice.
- Since this pranayama impacts the mind, ideally the body should be calm and steady. Restlessness in the body will disturb the mind.
- Keep the spine upright throughout. However do so without making it stiff.
- Drop the shoulders, keeping them relaxed. The face should be looking ahead.
- The mudras must be retained throughout.
- Do not hold the nostrils too tightly.
- Hold the stomach in gently while retaining.
- The ratio of counts in the practice is important. However a reduced ratio may be used for those who are uncomfortable with this practice.
- The ratio may be gradually expanded, after a few years of practice. The early stage has a 1:4:2 ratio of inhalation, retention and exhalation respectively. The next stage of progress would mean an increased ratio of 5:20:10.
- However, before the ratio is increased, it is more appropriate to increase the number of rounds. This will help your body accept the rigour of a raised ratio more smoothly.
- Do not do any section of this pranayama (or other pranayama practice) with force.
- Focus on making the exhalation and inhalation smooth, gentle and without jerks. Most people wrongly think that over-exerting themselves or doing these sections noisily provides more benefits.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- This pranayama poses one of the toughest instructional challenges for a teacher. Often, even after having taught this practice for years, one could make an error while suggesting which nostril has to inhale or exhale. Constant vigilance and meditation are important.
- Avoid walking about while giving instructions for this pranayama, since it can disorient you, creating further confusion in the count or nostril switch.
- Keep the instructions straightforward and simple.
- Enumerate benefits when students are holding the breath. Often this can be relaxing for them.
- Watch the students constantly. If someone is not comfortable, suggest she lie back and rejoin when the anxiety in the practice goes. When rejoining the practice she should ideally restart with inhalation from the left nostril so she does not enter a round midway.
- Also, since this a meditative practice, it is best not to have your assistants make physical corrections of posture suddenly. If a correction (like straightening the back) has to be done, the instructor must stand beside the practitioner to indicate she is there, then gently make the correction.
- If a mistake is made in the count, without too many words, switch to the correct count immediately. Most practitioners are in automode and are likely to be doing pranayama correctly in any case. If you apologise or make corrections or switches, it will actually confuse or distract the students.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- This practice fosters mental stability by balancing the left and right brain hemispheres.
- It strengthens the ability to switch perspective.
- It builds impulse control.
- It is highly de-stressing.

- Is used during de-addiction programmes to remove toxins from the body as well to prevent relapse.
- It cleanses the mind of inhibitions and blockages.

PSYCHIC

- This practice is said to help clear blockages within the 72,000 energy channels within our body.
- It works on the ajna chakra.
- It is a premeditative practice that can enhance dhyana or meditation.

PHYSICAL

- It activates the left and right brain hemispheres.
- It expands lung capacity.
- It heals and controls most chronic ailments and is therapeutic in the case of all sicknesses.

CHAPTER 4:
SURYA NAMASKAR

The sun salutation is the best warm-up there is. It may precede either asana practice or pranayama. If pranayama is independent of asana practice, it is best to do pranayama as a precursor.

Asanas practised without warm-ups can cause pain or injury to the body. Therefore, if the sun salutation precedes asana practice, it protects the body by preparing the muscles for intense stretches and warming or strengthening them.

Moreover, the sun salutation activates acupressure points that are powerful and healing. For instance, placing the chin on the ground in the ashtanga namaskar activates the point at the jaw-line which keeps the entire body young and vital. Similarly, where you look while holding the final pose – a point dictated by the classical technique – activates points that grant strength and vitality. The emphasis on activating these acupressure points would explain why some poses – such as the eight-limbed prayer pose – seem rather strange.

Also, barring the twist, every type of physical movement is taken care of in the classical version of the sun salutation. Even inversions (and their respective benefits) are replicated in the standing intense stretch pose (uttanasana). Thus, in itself, the sun salute is a complete practice.

However, the sun salutation is taught in a diluted manner or is modified. This is because in most yoga studios it is difficult to give instructions to a large class. Also, because of the precision that the sun salutation asks for, and the fact that instructors need to pay attention and invest a lot of energy, it is often skipped.

These days, it is even suggested that it is not part of yoga, which is a false claim.

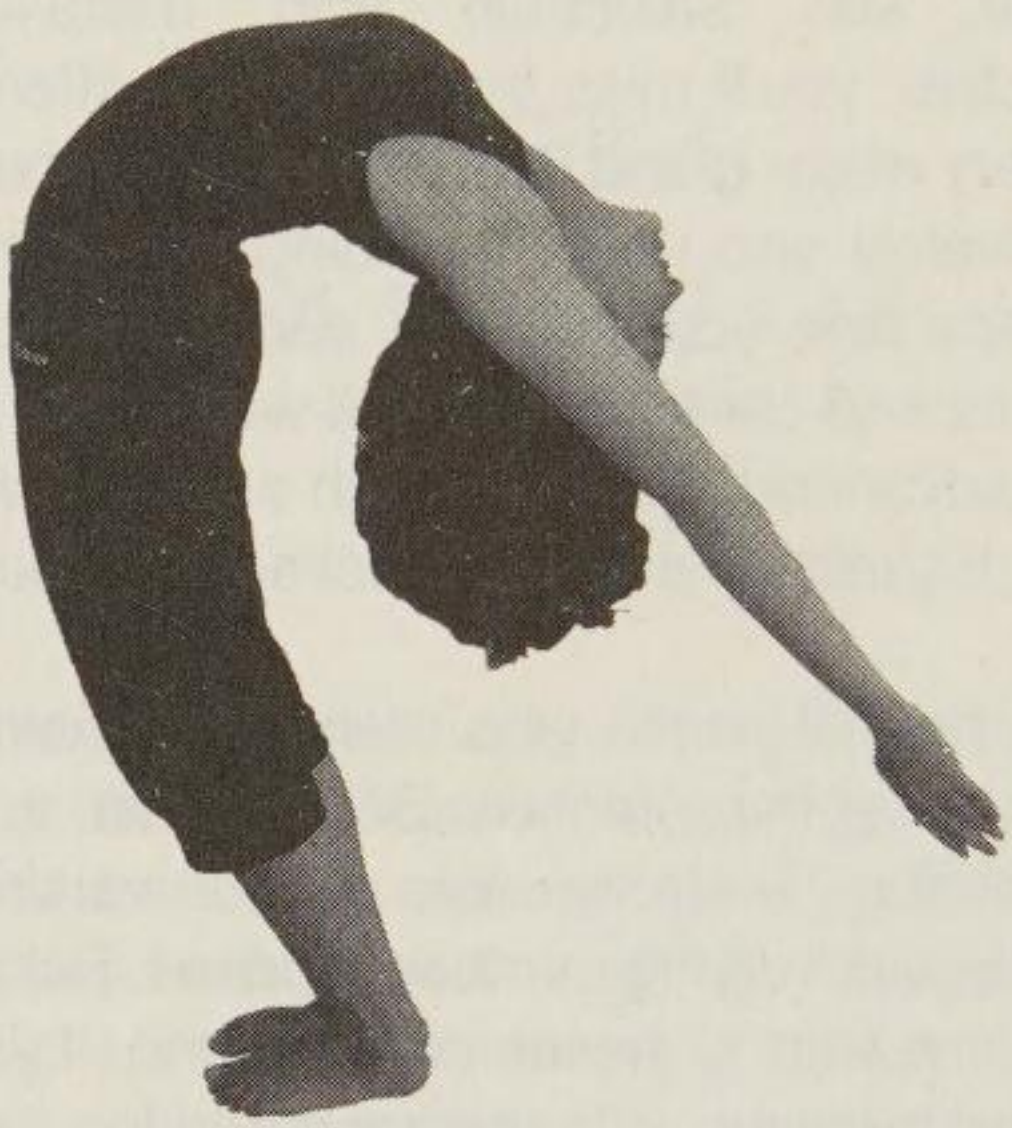
Doing the sun salutation with mistakes may be counterproductive; you'll miss the benefits it offers. When done accurately, every major gland in the body is touched upon, every muscle is activated and used, including those in the face. No wonder, it keeps one youthful! The sun salutation is the best form of aerobics and cardio workout. It warms the lungs, making retention and advanced practices such as the locks or bandhas easier to hold. Equally, it removes blockages in multiple chakras, all at once!

Those with normal health who wish to do warm-ups may do six to twelve sets of this practice. Beyond that, it is a matter of stamina and choice. There are also several versions of the sun salutation, some with varying number of poses. But the most basic practice is the one with 12 poses in one round. If you do this with the right leg, and follow up with another round for the left leg, you are said to have completed a set. Also remember to continue normal breathing between the inhalation and exhalation (which are start-ups to certain poses).

METHOD

- Stand up by the front of the mat, about a half foot from the front edge. This is to ensure that your feet stay within the mat throughout when you extend your legs back. Also, this ensures that your chin or forehead is placed on the mat in prone poses.
- Keep the hands folded in a namaste gesture with the palms together. Inhale and exhale. This is often referred to as pranamasana or the prayer pose.
- Inhale, lift both hands straight up. This is the ardhachandrasana or crescent pose.

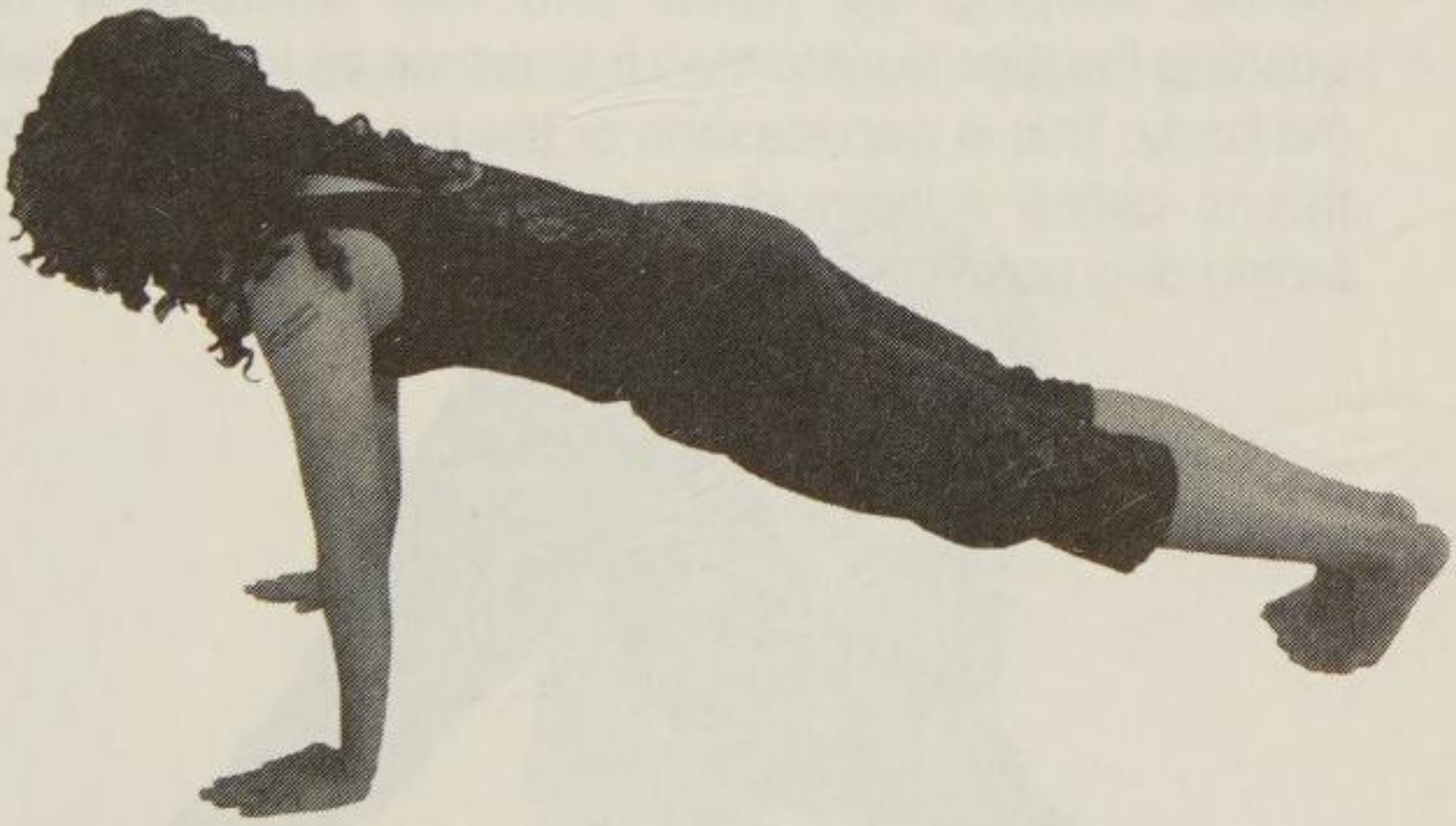
Alternatively, it's called hastautthasana or the raised arms pose.



- Exhaling, as though reaching for the wall in front, reach the hands down to the ground. Those who are flexible may place their palms down. Bend the knees lightly, if you have to, to place the hands down. This is called padahastasana or the hand-to-foot pose. Alternatively, it is called uttanasana or the intense stretch pose.

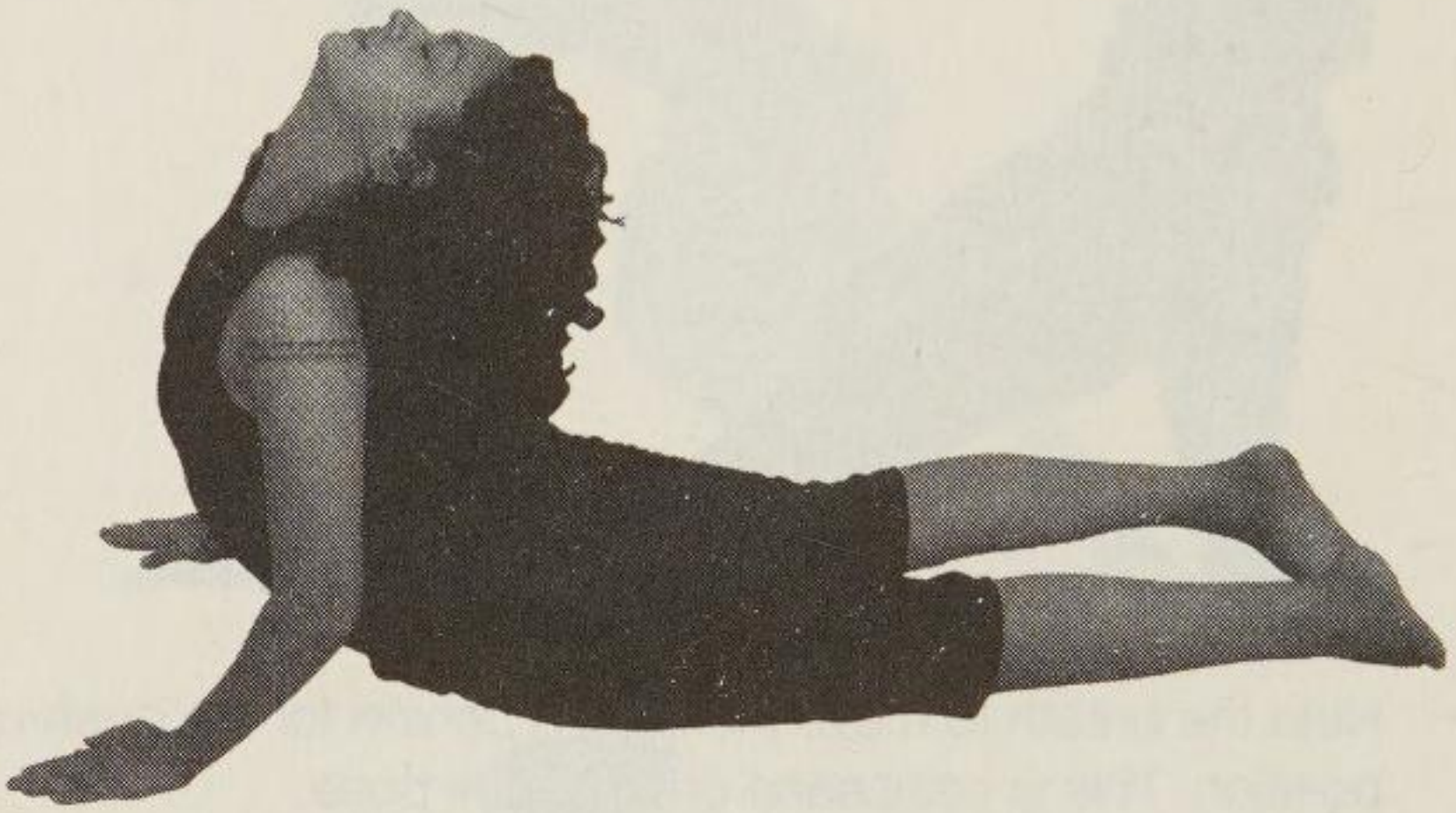
- Inhale. Move the right leg back to place the right knee down. This is ashwa sanchalanasana or the horse gesture pose.

- Hold the breath to move the left leg behind for the push-up position. This is setuasana or the plank pose.



- Exhaling, drop first the knees to ground, then the chest between the hands, with the chin down. Advanced students may place the forehead down. Arms remain close to the body. This is ashtanga namaskar or the eight-limbed prayer pose.

- Inhale, and raise the chin and chest off the ground. The stomach may rise, but keep the hips on the ground. Hands remain close to the body. This is bhujangasana or the cobra pose.



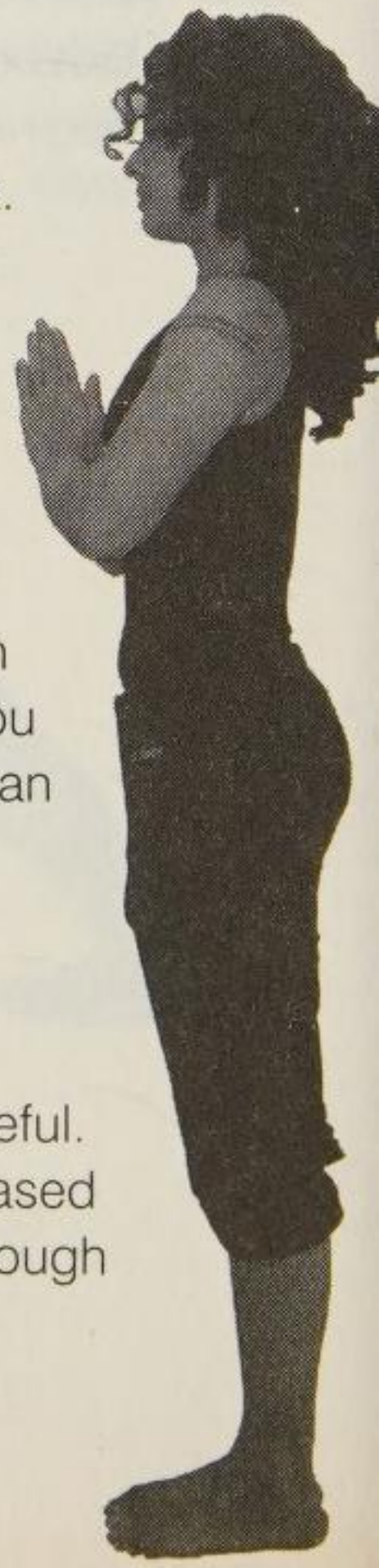
- Exhale, keeping the hands and feet where they are, pushing the hips up into the air to create an inverted V with the body. This is parvatasana or the mountain pose. Also, this is called adhomukhasvanasana or the downward-facing dog pose.

- Inhale, draw the right foot in front, between the hands, so you are once more in the horse gesture or crescent pose.

- Exhale, draw the left foot ahead, beside the right foot, beginning to stand.

- Inhale, raise both hands up in the air, curving from the waist. Keep the arms and legs straight, so you are now in the crescent or the raised arms pose.

- Exhale, drop the hands. This is tadasana. (Tadasana has two connotations – palm-tree or the mountain pose; also samastithi or the standing attentive pose.)
- This completes the round for the right leg. Repeat, with similar moves, for the left leg.
- When the sequence is done for both the legs, you have completed one set of the sun salutation. You may do up to six rounds if you are a beginner and 12 rounds if you are an intermediate or advanced practitioner.



CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Those with high blood pressure should be careful. They may approach the sun salutation in a phased manner once their BP is under control through regular practice.

- Also, those with heart conditions should be cautious. They may approach this practice in a phased manner and maintain a gentle speed.
- This may not be attempted by those suffering from fever, students who are physically exhausted, or those displaying inflammatory conditions and other illnesses.

FINE CORRECTIONS

Corrections may continue for a whole lifetime for the sun salutation. You progress by developing a fine, subtle awareness of the body, the muscles and breathing techniques. You gain in strength and can continuously deepen poses. This makes the practice exciting at all times. It is only when awareness does not exist – between the mind-body-breath –that people become bored with the practice.

- In the first position (the prayer pose), ensure that the feet are together, unless you are overweight at the thighs, or have bow legs. In which case, this may be difficult.
- In the second position (crescent pose), the arms and legs should remain straight. Most practitioners tend to bend the arms at the elbows. This weakens the upward arch of the upper back, tones the inner arms less efficiently, and comes in the way of balancing techniques. The legs are often bent to protect the lower back. This must be avoided, since this pose has the capacity to heal lower back problems and strengthen back muscles. The back of the legs (right up to ankles) also don't get toned well if these mistakes continue. Interestingly, in some classes, the hands drag themselves along the legs and hug the body as they go up. While this looks artistic its impact on the arm muscles is minimal.
- In the third position (hand-to-foot pose), it is very important to drop the neck, let it hang loose and look at the thighs. Most practitioners, including advanced ones, tend to look up. This puts unnecessary pressure at the base of the skull, and makes you lose out on what the pose is supposed to do – prepare you for the intense gush of blood to the head in inversions. Also, contracting the neck muscles will stiffen them instead of making them supple and flexible.

- Also, in the third position, people tend to be relaxed about the hands' position. They should be placed at either side of the feet, in preparation for the next move. Keeping the palms down is important if one wishes to cultivate flexibility in the spine and legs. You may bend the legs at the knees to do so initially, after which almost miraculously the legs tend to become more flexible. Placing the palms down also tones the arms.
- In the fourth position (horse gesture pose) the foot must reach as far back as possible. You may place the toes down, curling them to lock the foot. Or you may place the back of the foot on the mat. This is an advanced practice but will work on the stiff tendons at the ankles preparing you for the lotus pose and other asanas where the ankles are severely stretched.
- Also, often in the fourth position, students forget to lift their head or look up. This lift creates a smooth arch at the spine which is said to tone it.
- In the fourth position, most students tend to hold the hips high. The hips must in fact drop low, so this pose is a deep lunge. This intensifies the stretch at the hips, lower back and the thighs.
- Interestingly, a person who may display flexibility while entering the fourth position may display less flexibility in the ninth position. How can the same pose get two such results from a person? This is because they are not completing each pose accurately. Also, they imagine that they are not flexible enough to complete the pose; this cannot be true if they could do it once at the start of the practice. In fact, the second move is facilitated by the first one, since the warm-up makes this stretch bearable. A way to address errors at this stage is to bring the foot forward in this pose, lift the leg and drop it into position with more awareness. Sometimes, one may have to lift the adjoining arm off, to swing the leg from the side, and bring the foot ahead. This may have to be done especially by women with heavy breasts, or by those who are obese. (The instructor needs to point this

variation out to such students, so they know it is possible and may be attempted.)

- In the fifth position (plank pose), there are several errors that creep in, especially as the attention wavers, and one mistakenly assumes that one's stamina is flagging. The legs may curve at the thighs as they relax. They should be straight like a plank.
- In the fifth position, the hips may rise up. This is done unconsciously to shift the weight to the legs instead of holding it at the upper back and arms. This must be corrected if you wish to tone the arms and gain in upper back strength for several advanced practices and poses.
- When the above error happens in the plank pose, the face too tends to shift behind the hands. The face must be positioned ahead, and you must also look forward. This calls for strength in the arms and upper back, which the pose helps build.
- The sixth position (eight-limbed prayer pose) is often done shabbily. The knees fall first; then the stomach collapses, either because one is unaware or one lacks upper back stamina. The stomach must not collapse down; rather the chest should be lowered between the hands. Also, when dropping the chest down, the arms must not flare at the elbows, but stay close to the body to build in strength. When done properly, the body displays a wave-like flow, on being viewed from the top.
- In the seventh position (cobra pose), most students, including advanced practitioners, tend to scrunch their shoulders, drawing them up towards the ears. You must drop the shoulders. This shifts the weight to the wrists and upper back, which must be strengthened.
- Also, in the seventh position, the right way to hold the pose is to keep the arms close and straight. Drop the shoulders, push the chest out, and lift the chin up to gaze at the ceiling. Keep the mouth shut. Most students open their mouths visibly, or loosen it from inside; this comes in the way of the neck getting toned. The feet should also be together, unless

you have extreme lower back pain, knee pain, are knock-kneed or obese.

- In the eight position (mountain pose), there will be several errors that must be addressed. Some of these correction can only be implemented once flexibility develops or through regular practice. The main focus, initially, must be to maintain the position of the hands and feet before pushing the hips up. Many schools insist on moving the hands and legs, but unless given a valid reason, do not go by such recommendations. Keeping the feet and hands in the same position develops stamina and flexibility, so much so that with time, the heels will be flat on the ground and the head will touch the mat too.
- In this position, push deeply from the shoulder blades. This releases a stiff upper back and tones the arms. Push from the heels too. This opens the hips and legs powerfully. The spine feels the stretch from both the arms and legs.
- In this position, look at your stomach. The abdominal muscles will strengthen. Surprisingly, the stomach will cave in when you just look at the navel.

INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

- All suggestions listed under 'Fine Corrections' need to be constantly referred to during the class. Making such suggestions may be disorienting, or can make you forget the round being attended to, and the foot that is dominant. The fourth and the ninth position may especially be disorienting, since you may not recall whether you started the sun salutation or are winding it up. So all corrections and suggestions may be made only once you are confident about not losing track of such essentials.
- Physically making the corrections the poses ask for may be difficult in a large class. In which case, certain poses which give trouble may be explained separately so that the corrections are learnt by the students and incorporated.
- Fast rounds serve as a great warm-up technique, while slow rounds are meditative. Ideally students should be able

to do both fast and slow rounds. If the mind is completely engaged, there will be no panic when the speed is changed. Mention this, if you wish to raise the bar in terms of awareness and mind control.

- Fast rounds are easier, though new students may panic if their co-ordination or flexibility happens to be wobbly. So the speed needs to be manipulated. Slow rounds demand more strength in each pose.
- Though some students may indicate that they find the sun salutation boring or wish to skip it, it is very essential practice, especially for beginners, since this series prepares you for most other advanced poses which involve strength, mental grit, physical flexibility and attention to breathing. You may make the session engaging by playing with the pace, and including variations of poses in the sun salutation for advanced students. For instance, instead of the eight-limbed prayer pose you could ask advanced students to drop into the rod pose. Or instead of the basic cobra, you could urge them to try the upward-facing dog.

CONNECTION TO OTHER POSES

- The sun salutation prepares one for most advanced practices, including pranayama.

BENEFITS

EMOTIONAL

- The sun salutation is stimulating and lessens a sense of dullness.
- It helps fight depression.
- It tones the spinal nerves, which keep the mind vital and fresh.

PSYCHIC

- It works on several chakras – the ajna, anahata, swadhistana,

manipura and vishuddhi, and addresses imbalances, if any, in all of them.
- It can enhance your meditative skills by removing lethargy and sluggishness.
- Since attention is given to both legs equally, it harmonises the left and right brain hemispheres, so that our logical and emotional parts are working in tandem.

PHYSICAL

- The sun salutation facilitates lymphatic drainage. The lymphatic system does not have a natural pumping mechanism; it needs the movement of muscles to help clear the build up of waste. The sun salutation, by completely involving all muscles groups, including subtle muscle fibres, aids this system.
- It works on all the major endocrine glands through the massaging impact it has.
- It tones all muscles groups.
- It strengthens the back, making the spine flexible, the supporting muscles groups strong and relieves and prevents problems of the upper, mid and lower back.
- The chest-opening poses are great for those with respiratory problems and upper back stiffness.
- It acts as the best cardio and aerobics warm-up.
- The poses which squeeze the stomach work on the digestive system, keeping it healthy and vital.
- It works powerfully on the urogenital system.
- It prevents the early onset of puberty in children, if they start the practice. This is entirely good since it means their mind and body will mature in tandem.
- It helps with weight loss. Interestingly, in the case of those who are thin and are trying to gain weight, it can have the reverse effect, stimulating hunger. It thus seems to have a toggle effect in weight management.
- It helps those who are diabetic.
- It fights lethargy.
- The practice is said to keep one young and energetic.

SECTION III

WITHIN THE CLASS

There are facets to a yoga class that are never discussed openly. In this book, we are taking a bold step. We are bringing to the fore what makes or mars a yoga class.

Any serious yoga practitioner or instructor will tell you, in a private discussion, that when they choose to practise or teach, there are issues which determine their attitude on the mat or before a class. These issues fall within the realm of intuition and personal experience, and while the practitioner or instructor may feel strongly about them, they feel embarrassed discussing them in public.

The chapters in this section then shed light on these issues. They deal with the main needs of a class, in terms of structure, management, pace and energy.

The suggestions in this segment are interchangeable, and apply both to instructors as well practitioners with a well-established personal sadhana. Though some parts seem to deal exclusively with either the student or the instructor, they are actually relevant for both and must be read accordingly. For instance, a student seeking to select a yoga class in an informed manner may find the issues facing an instructor highly informative.

CHAPTER 1:
CLASS MANAGEMENT

There are several issues related to class management. This chapter hopes to clarify one's approach to a yoga class and understand the flow of energy within such spaces.

PRIVATE CLASSES VS GROUP CLASSES

In a private class, if the student is fit and raring to go, the intensity of the class will be powerful. The instructor needs to have a definite structure in place and remain supremely efficient throughout.

The truth though is that in a private class the reverse is often true – the student may not be fit, and the instructor may not push herself to deliver or may feel entirely drained at the end of a session. There are days when a private student may indicate pointedly that she is not in a place of strength and would prefer a diluted version of practice. Since the fees are high and the instructor may have established a rapport with her disciple, she may comply. In a group class however, the same student may be encouraged by the energy of other practitioners. This is further proof of synchronicity, or biological networking. Furthermore, the instructor will be less likely to succumb to the student's suggestions since she has a full class to consider.

Therefore unless you're a student with extremely good stamina, or an instructor who has mastered the ability to refuse requests and build pace and excitement, a group class is always a wiser alternative. This is an observation that many personal trainers

vouch for – that group classes, especially large classes, are easier to teach than private or smaller classes.

Similarly, if you are a student looking to benefit from a strong yoga session but think you lack strength and flexibility for intense practice, or if you are unsure about your body's capacity, it is a good idea to join a large group which will buoy you up. Intriguingly, even strong students are motivated into holding more advanced poses in a large group, especially if they see beginners doing what they ought to be capable of.

If you are an advanced student who does not find a group class that is challenging, and you know of a teacher who can lift your practice to another level, it is best to opt for a private class. Alternatively, you may opt for a few private classes to push your body, and a group class for structure and steadiness of practice.

LARGE GROUPS VS SMALL GROUPS

Despite the anonymity one is likely to have in a large group, big classes tend to lift the spirits of both the instructor and a student, leading to great performances on the mat.

A small group, on the other hand, requires as much time and personal attention as a private class, and comes with all its associated problems. Also, in small classes stronger personalities are likely to surface – students may indicate their boredom with a particular practice more vociferously, either through body language, or by chatting with their neighbours, or by complaining to the teacher. All of this is demotivating for everybody concerned – the instructor, the other students and of course, the pupil with negative energy. Controlling such behaviour, though possible, is very exhausting.

In a large group, somehow the numbers seem to contain such behaviour – either because the student does not wish to draw attention from a large group or is fearful of criticism or indifference from the others. In a small group, conversely, since the students know the personalities of one another, a cranky comment can emerge unexpectedly and dissipate the energy of everybody

concerned. Therefore, if you are an instructor do not assume a small group is more manageable than a large one.

In either case though, a teacher should have a behavioral code of conduct in place to ensure that there is no outbreak of trouble. This is especially because yoga, more than any other form of fitness activity, tends to release pent up emotions and bring childhood patterns to the fore, leading to crabby behaviour. When such emotional tensions get released, the instructor is placed in a role that she has not chosen at all. Subconsciously, the student could view the yoga tutor as a school teacher she may have been positively or negatively influenced by as a child, or most disturbingly, as a parent. Even though the instructor may strive to maintain neutrality, the student could invest these expectations on the instructor. This can be draining and demanding. Unless a yoga teacher wishes to take on counseling, she must subtly discourage such expectations. Predictably, such issues surface more frequently in smaller groups, where students believe they have established a degree of familiarity with the tutor.

If you, as a student, are joining a small group, do not automatically assume that this means more personal attention. You will find that a small group invites more distractions, tantrums, and small talk. If you must join a small group, ensure that it is under a very strong teacher who can control a class. A strong teacher is one who can push you out of your comfort or fear zone and make you feel energised.

How about mixed groups? These work in favour of both beginners and advanced students. If there are just a few advanced practitioners, beginners tend to mirror them and push themselves. Similarly, an advanced student who is smug about her practice will be compelled to push herself after witnessing the progress of the beginners. For an instructor of course, all this can only mean that it is difficult to pace a class. As a rule, in a mixed group, assume that everybody will be able to keep pace with a challenging session.

Most of all, it is exciting to watch how the mixed group manages to carry out challenging poses with complete focus. This can be an

uplifting experience for all concerned – the instructor as well as all the students.

FAST VS SLOW CLASSES

As an instructor, you must build a reputation for the type of class you offer – gentle, dynamic, energetic, therapeutic, tough or meditative. This becomes your class's signature.

Then, if you are experienced enough to gauge the energy of a class, pace it differently each time. While the main texture of your class will not be not compromised, students will feel refreshed after each session.

If you are a student, choose a class based on the reputation of the teacher. Your choice may be determined by whether you wish to be pulled out of your comfort zone or remain there. It would be unwise and unfair to join a class without being aware of such issues.

Ideally the pace should not be a focus point at all. A good instructor can switch between fast and slow paces and get the class to follow either. What matters is the toughness or the gentleness of a class. Ideally, all classes should be done meditatively. If this one rule is followed, a student can opt for any kind of class.

CORRECTIONS: WHEN AND HOW

A good class is one where corrections are constantly being made. This is meant to lift a student's performance. The student's attitude to corrections needs to be one of openness. While some students tend to feel offended or persecuted, such reactions only block their own progress.

For an instructor, corrections are very demanding and draining. That is why most classes have a standard format, where the instructions are given and students are let to feel their way about, without any form of strict tutor supervision. However, an excellent teacher can point out the exact mistake a student is making, so she can enter a pose more easily. While choosing a class therefore, care should be taken to opt for one with a teacher who corrects.

The mistake students often make is to go to a class where instructors can flaunt exotic poses. While such tutors may have great yoga technique, they may not possess excellent teaching skills! A good instructor is one who, even if she cannot hold a pose due to age or fatigue, can help a student reach a place of competence. The question one needs to ask therefore before signing up is simple: Can this instructor also push me to those heights she has reached, or somewhere close to that? If the answer is yes, chances are the perfect class has been found.

The early chapters describe the corrections one needs to suggest to students. Since this is a sensitive topic, a few more points need to be kept in mind. Here are a few rules for instructors:

- If you are the instructor, your touch must be gentle.
- Even a quiet student can become cantankerous if touched too suddenly or roughly in an advanced pose. So the pressure of the hand and the approach has to be calculated. It is always a good idea to indicate your presence by standing next to a student initially. Sometimes a student may shut her eyes. Your touch could shock her. This is particularly dangerous if the student is holding an inversion like the headstand or the scorpion.
- Unless you have established a rapport with a student, do not make corrections at the end of a long hold. At that point, the body is fatigued, and corrections will seem like loud interference. For instance, if the class is holding the headstand for five minutes, and some students have slumped because of shoulder fatigue, it would be inappropriate to make a correction; the student is likely to feel irascible or upset that you do not understand her determination to hold a pose and her discomfiture. Also, since the muscles are now tired, corrections may actually break the student's pose, and be completely counterproductive. After considering these points, if you still feel that the student has the stamina to make a correction, simply drop a verbal suggestion and allow her to either correct herself or hold on as is.
- The above suggestion is true even for simple poses like leg

raises. If the student's stamina is weak, physical touch can trigger an extreme reaction. Such flare-ups are avoidable.

- A long list of corrections for beginners may be confusing. Initially allow them to feel their way within a pose. After a few sessions if their progress is blocked due to errors, you may incorporate corrections, and phase them out.
- It is important to remember that though a student may wish to be corrected, absorbing a suggestion may not be possible for everybody. It is amazing how disconnected people are with their bodies. In such cases, it is best to drop the corrections for the moment. Amazingly, this makes the student less nervous and somewhere subconsciously the corrections will fall into place.
- Beginners may feel embarrassed if too much attention is directed at them. Therefore, with gentle intuition, lead such students through the poses. It is a good idea not to call out the student's name loudly and too often in a class. Instead, stand beside the student and talk to her personally, in a hushed tone.
- With advanced poses, especially the headstand and the crow, do not get too technical about corrections. There is no point discussing the muscle being used unless the pose is actually experienced. Words block experiential progress. Broadly outline how the pose is reached initially; the finer details can only be explained as the students move ahead with the pose. Equally, bear in mind that too much time devoted to the technical errors of one student will bore the rest of the group, especially if they have held the pose well.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITY TYPES

As an instructor, establishing a neutral set of guidelines that can accommodate all types of personalities leads to a structured class. Some guidelines for students may include not talking in a class, not coming in late, not leaving early as a matter of principle, and dressing appropriately so as to be able to do the poses (wearing jeans to a yoga class, for instance, would restrict movement). Other rules that may need to be emphasized are – no mobiles

during class, no disturbing movements when in the final stage of relaxation, no drinking water during class (which is a sensible suggestion because inversions will cause reflux if water has been recently consumed, and the outcome can be dangerous).

Similarly, answering questions after the class (instead of during the class unless it is directly related to a new pose being taught), and not talking to students before a class could be a few self-imposed rules conveyed to a class. If these are not imposed, the process of teaching can be disturbing, since some students may seek negative attention by either suggesting they are bored or by pointing out errors in the postures of other students. Ideally both the instructor and student should spend some time quietly before starting practice.

You can have a set of guidelines, and hand them over to new students when they come. Let them know that submitting to these rules is not a sign of weakness; it is meant to power their own progress.

CHAPTER 2:
STRUCTURING SESSIONS

Whether you are dealing with a mixed group or one that can be graded, it is best to have a structure in mind, with the sequence of pranayama, the number of sun salutes and asanas, and meditation techniques organised around the time frame allotted. Also, it is important to decide the duration of the poses and the repetitions allowed for dynamic ones like the dolphin pose. This sort of planning comes with practice and experience. Having a few extra poses within the sequence in case there is extra time is also recommended; this is most likely to happen when the pace is too fast or the students are too tired to be able to hold poses long or unwilling to repeat asanas. This dip in energy is often observed when the seasons shift or when the class is scheduled for late evenings.

If you are using this manual as a self-help guide, then you must create a sequence of 12 poses, with pranayama and sun salutes as warm-up, and the corpse pose as the relaxing finale. This creates a firm foundation for new and advanced variations.

Though many instructors pride themselves on leading a class without structuring it in advance, it will be found that participants feel elated when they have been in a yoga class that has been planned.

The problem with pre-planning, as instructors will point out, is that often the energy of the class and the ability of the students may not be on par with the structure one may have prepared. However, this anxiety is valid only if a teacher is a novice. Most

instructors with solid experience in teaching know that one can have several alternative poses against whatever is planned. This ability to select alternative poses keeps teachers relaxed, which in itself is an important ingredient while leading a class. It allows her to stick to a structure yet flow with the energy of the students.

The same holds true for personal practice. It is more satisfying to structure one's practice, selecting a set of poses in advance. To flow freely means that you could you end up favouring one part of the body over another, or avoid poses where you are weak (a recurrent problem when you practise on your own).

STRUCTURING A CLASS

Here are some guidelines to help you structure a class:

Address both beginners and advanced students in a mixed group

Having only an advanced or a beginner's level class structure when addressing a mixed group will leave some or many participants unhappy. An ideal teacher takes into consideration different levels of preparedness of students and includes everybody. This is called an open class.

In mixed groups, if some students are unable to do certain poses, they could lie back or stare at the advanced learners. This can be disturbing and intrusive behaviour and one that teacher cannot control unless she provides alternative poses for those unable to hold a certain pose. Ideally, these alternative poses must also be planned ahead. For certain poses in particular, it may always be taken for granted that a few students will not be able to hold them; these poses include the headstand, shoulder-stand, the wheel, scorpion, or arm balancers like the crow. A teacher must always prepare alternatives to these poses. A good alternative for the headstand, for instance, would be the dolphin. For the crow, it could be the plain plank pose.

Ideally, the alternatives will be similar to the pose that the rest of the class is engaged with. The sequence then will absorb

everybody in a similar fashion, invite the use of similar muscles, and create the muscle memory needed to grow in a pose and advance. It keeps the energy flowing instead of breaking it, as is most likely to happen when a few people sit around and watch. For instance, if the beginners are attempting a supported shoulder-stand, intermediate and advanced students may try the unsupported shoulder-stand. For those who are rank beginners and cannot do either, the pelvic tilt (also called setubandhasana or the locked bridge pose) is a good way to prepare the hips for the lift required in the shoulder-stand.

Alternatively, organise a class at the registration stage

Yoga centres have long dealt with the challenges posed by mixed groups by creating different groups that grade and slot participants. So, as a student you may be invited to sign up for either advanced or intermediate or beginner level classes. Even in such groups you may find that participants, who had rated themselves as advanced students, flounder, finding some poses difficult to negotiate. Similarly, some beginners who are very focussed and good at co-ordination will pick up advanced poses soon. Certainly, categorization, while never foolproof, helps the teachers plan modules. But unless the centre is organised at the registration stage itself, there is bound to be a mixed bag of participation; an instructor therefore will have to innovate to take on a group.

Allot time based on the grade of the class

When planning a class, keep repetitions for the beginners. They will not have the stamina to hold a pose for a long duration, but must slowly be led towards a pose. For this reason, a beginner's class will also need more poses. This also holds true if you are a novice and are structuring a personal session; plan for more poses and more repetitions till you build the stamina for longer holds.

Advanced students enjoy the challenge of holding poses for a long duration. Equally, teaching new variations of known poses will

keep the energy high, and challenge the students' muscular skills if introduced at the right stage. However, even when new variations are learnt by the students, as a teacher, you must constantly revert to the basics at regular intervals. This will ensure that the students retain their muscular memory for them; it will also help you determine if the students still have the stamina for the poses. Also, once the basics have been mastered, new poses get easier to pick up, often at first attempt.

Keep extra time aside to teach new poses

You must set aside some time either to learn (if a practitioner) or teach (if an instructor) new poses.

The duration allotted to teaching or learning a new pose must include within it the time required to explain and decode the asana. The pose has to be explained, executed and demonstrated and ideally, its benefits and contraindications also must be clarified, so the teaching process is complete.

As a practitioner, these details must be imbibed. This will create a connection with the pose. It will also help you understand why a pose must be done in a particular way. If you do not understand the benefits of an asana, you may enter it in a way that will exclude parts of the body or entire muscle groups. For instance, those who do not grasp the nuances of the classic fish fail to lift the head to enter or exit it; they thus completely bypass the back and neck muscles, when the pose in fact feeds off their strength.

As a teacher, when teaching a new pose, you must remember that you need plenty of time to spot the mistakes participants make. Most instructors in a yoga class are not able to catch the errors of students. This is a pity, since for several poses, including arm balancers and the headstand, this is a core aspect of learning. In fact, when such mistakes are pointed out, beginners pick up these poses quickly. If the group is large, consider splitting up the class into sections, so the teaching of the new pose may be staggered.

If you are learning a new pose on your own, hold it for a short duration and try to incorporate as many corrections as possible with awareness. Progressively increase the duration in the pose.

Stick to the same pose over a few weeks till your stamina increases. Instead of trying several new poses for a short duration, spend time on a new pose till you master it. This will help you learn other poses quickly due to increased awareness, co-ordination and focus.

STRUCTURING PERSONAL PRACTICE

Here are some guidelines to help you plan your personal sessions.

Have a standard chart

Yoga is a cleansing ritual. Would you rather brush your teeth daily for a few minutes, or just once a week for 20 minutes? So too, you cannot practise fitfully. When structuring your personal session therefore it is good to have a standard chart for daily practice. Though most people are ambitious about learning and practising, sessions must be planned conservatively to ensure that they can be managed every day. Instead of planning a long chart which is not negotiable, and makes you practise erratically, it is better to plan a compact one that may be attempted whether free or pressed for time. Daily sessions, even of a short duration are better than long, erratic sessions with gaps spanning days and weeks, no matter how advanced a practitioner you are. Regular practice keeps you fresh and keen to return to the mat, whereas erratic sessions are guilt-driven.

Having a fixed chart also means that on the days when you are in a rush or stressed out, you will attempt the same routine, however fast. This can be a life-transformative, calming and meditative experience that will help you skid through a busy day with greater control.

Introduce variety into your sessions

Having a fixed chart does not mean your session has to be boring. You can extend the time for which you hold every pose. You can also plan variations around the same chart, attempting both the basic and advanced asanas. Variations are especially useful

when you are running short of time. This is because variations are more difficult to hold; so the time consumed will be minimal, but you will still feel satisfied for having challenged yourself physically and mentally.

Pranayama is a must

Though most practitioners, including advanced ones, prefer asanas over the other limbs of yoga, it is best to create a chart that includes pranayama (along with asanas, meditation and rest breaks). Pranayama will prepare you for the retention of breath. This is of particular use when attempting the scorpion and the peacock, where you end up holding your breath initially due to the extreme nature of these poses. Alternate nostril breathing (also referred to as nadi shodhana or energy channel purifying practice) is powerful if one wishes to develop impulse control. In case of any injury or illness, pranayama will help you heal quickly.

Include warm-ups

The flow of poses must always follow a warm-up. The ideal warm-ups are the joint or energy releasing series (pawanmuktasana), and the sun salute series.

If you are sick or weak, the joint or energy releasing series is the best warm-up. Though seemingly simple, when repeated often they can be rather challenging. There are several hundred variations to these, and with time, you can create your own module, with variations, particularly as the muscles get bored or tired.

The second ideal warm-up is the sun salute series. Though these are standard (with a few schools having slight differences in the flow of poses), they are mostly a set of 12 standard positions. The flow may be made interesting by playing with the pace or by holding different poses for varying lengths of time.

A warm-up is important; it prepares the muscles for the effort that lies ahead. Also, if there is a fall, as may happen when trying a

new pose like the scorpion or the headstand, the chance of injury reduces due to the warmth created within the muscles, and the concurrent increase in their elasticity.

CHAPTER 3:
SEQUENCING A CLASS

Sequencing a class is a refined art. Most people, including instructors, do not appreciate the value of this, or are unaware of its relevance.

A sequence requires more than mere experience in teaching; it requires a keen awareness of the traditional wisdom and scientific logic guiding each asana, so the poses are arranged in a way that will keep the participants healthy.

HOW SEQUENCING WORKS

A great sequence is a like a good, relaxing massage. Any massage will make you happy. But a good massage will detox you and make you healthy, so its impact is both immediate and long-term. It will engage the lymphatic system through movements in a set direction. Only a refined and well-informed masseur knows how to do this. The same goes for a structured class – it comes from a tradition or a teacher who knows that a set of poses must follow a certain pattern.

At the most basic level, counter-poses must be used wisely. Fortunately, most instructors within the yoga community have a grasp on this subject. For instance, inversions like the shoulder-stand, which scrunch the neck, would need to be followed by a movement that also involves the neck, but in the opposite direction. This movement becomes a counter-pose. Similarly, a forward-bend must always be followed by a backbend which releases the muscles that had been rendered tense by the

forward-bend. For similar reasons, a side-twist (either standing or seated) will follow backbends.

The science guiding counter-poses is rather commonsensical. Counter-poses release muscles that were contracted or rendered tense in a particular pose. This release is very important if one wishes to leave the mat feeling good.

Using counter-poses wisely will prevent episodes of inexplicable yoga injuries. Some classes emphasize only one set of poses continuously on a given day. This may work initially, but it will leave you sore the next day. This goes against the very foundation of yoga which is to keep you vital and upbeat.

The second rule of thumb is this – club a similar set of poses so the sequence is efficient. For instance, having three standing poses clubbed together in a class, instead of splitting them up and positioning them at the beginning, middle or end is a recommended tradition. The same goes for the inversions, the backbend or forward-bends.

What is the main advantage to marrying similar poses? If you club three inversions, you can make do with one strong counter-pose. For instance the three inversions – the headstand, the shoulder-stand and the plough can be countered with a well-executed fish pose. This also gives you control over the time you have in class for a variety of asanas.

While standing poses may be positioned either at the beginning or the end of other poses, the remaining asanas must always follow a sequence.

SOME SIMPLE RULES

- Inversions are followed by their counter-poses.
- The peacock pose cannot ever be done before an inversion. This has to do with the way a pose works on lymphatic drainage and other systems of excretion and waste removal. The peacock pose is said to be powerful enough to dislodge even worms from the intestinal tract. Therefore, following the peacock pose, if you swept the worms away, standing up on your head would just push them all way

back in! Getting the sequence wrong here is akin to first cleaning your room, collecting the waste at the entrance for disposal, then wilfully sweeping the dirt back in!

- The sequence following the counter-pose to the inversions should protect the spine (which, for a beginner, is especially very vulnerable). One can move into the forward-bend, with the plank acting as the counter-pose.
- Backbends therefore must always come after the inversions and never before. They can follow the forward-bend.
- In the backbends, the bow pose comes at the end of the backbends.
- Even the backbends clearly have a sequence. The cobra pose needs upper back strength, the locust needs upper back strength and mid-back flexibility. The bow asks for hip and lower back flexibility. As you can see, these three poses start from the top of the spine, and move down low. Though each of these backbends works on the entire spine, each also has an intense effect on certain parts of it.

Sequencing is the core of a good yoga session. That is why it is good to have a set of basic classic poses around which one includes variations. The variations one chooses must depend on the ability and energy of the class.

If a class is not sequenced there may be a disturbing sense of disarray. Let's use an analogy. All great music is appreciated – whatever the genre – due to the invisible mathematics that goes into the construction of the song. The same goes for a well-sequenced yoga class! The structure may not be visible to the students, but they will love the end result of it.

WHERE TO PLACE INTERMEDIARY AND REST POSES

Some poses are intermediary poses and some are rest poses but either may be used with wisdom to release tense muscles. The best of the resting poses is the child pose, which is to be attempted after an inversion like the headstand or a backbend such as the camel. The corpse pose and the crocodile pose are similarly rest poses to be attempted between inversions and backbends respectively.

The cat pose, though a complete pose in itself, can be used to relax the back after backbends. The standing palm-tree is a good break between standing poses, including sequences like the sun salutation. The plank is an effective intermediary and counter-pose after any seated forward-bend.

WHERE TO PLACE PRANAYAMA SEQUENCES

Ideally pranayama must follow a sequence of asanas. Many traditionalists will disapprove of pranayama preceding asanas. Also, they will point out that the eight limbs of yoga, which list pranayama after asanas, cannot be tampered with.

This rule though must be strictly adhered to only if one's pranayama practice is very intense. In that case, one will have to do the asana to prepare the body for pranayama, since pranayama is said to channel one's life force, while asanas are said to clean up these channels in preparation for that. Moreover, the warm-up provided by the surya namaskar and asanas helps with retention and exhalation, and inversions help clear the lungs. One may have a long yoga nidra or corpse pose break between the asana and pranayama rounds to rest the body and centre the mind. This must last at least 15 minutes or so if the asana sequence is over an hour or more.

But where practice time is limited one may have to place pranayama ahead of asana practice. There is a traditional justification for this choice too. When pranayama is done, it must be followed in a meditative manner. Unless one has substantial time to take a break between asanas and pranayama, one will end up doing the latter in a hurry. Attempting pranayama in a rush is counterproductive. On settling down on the mat then, it is best to attempt a brief meditative corpse pose to ease the body and mind into a relaxed state. This can be followed immediately by pranayama so the mind is calm and centred. This will power the rest of one's practice.

POINTS TO REMEMBER: A RECAP

- Attempt the sun salutation or the energy releasing series before asana practice.
- The standing poses may be placed at the beginning or end of a sequence.
- Use preparatory poses if the class is new to yoga. Simple poses lay the foundation for the tough ones. They also prevent injuries. For instance, the dolphin pose and the downward-facing dog pose are excellent asanas to begin with; attempting the headstand without mastering such poses that build muscular strength is not recommended.
- Encourage intermediary poses, especially for beginners, to relieve contracted muscles. A good example would be to follow up the plough pose with the double leg energy release pose (dwipada supta vajrasana) or the abdominal side-twist (jathara parivartasana).
- Use a resting meditative pose after a set of similar poses. This is important to prepare the body for the next challenge, and also calm the mind. Moving too fast when the breath has not returned to normal can be counterproductive; it leads to the constant flow of stress hormones, thus making the practitioner nervous or aggressive.
- Always attempt a counter-pose after a set of similar poses. For instance, after backbends, attempt a cat stretch.
- Always attempt the peacock pose with the last set of poses in your sequence. The same goes for the boat pose.
- Though sequencing seems complicated it is very commonsensical. Every forward-bend needs a backbend. A challenging set of asanas needs a relaxing pose. The closest counter-pose to offset a group of asanas should ideally be chosen. For instance, the plank pose is the perfect backbend and chest-opener for a seated forward-bend because it takes off from where the latter ends. You are on your hips, your hands are returned to base position, so you can flow into the plank from that.
- The duration of a pose should not be fixed but regulated according to an individual's capacity, even within a large

group. This holds true even in private practice. The body needs time to acclimatize. In an inversion, for instance, the entire torso and the brain must slowly get used to the great gush of blood, and an anti-gravity drag.

SOME COMMON INTERMEDIARY, COUNTER AND PREPARATORY POSES

- All standing poses are ideal for beginners as preparatory poses, to improve flexibility, learn the technique of balance, and get used to the anti-gravity drag of inversions. The standing-twists also provide an intense stretch to the limbs, release the hips and make them supple, and prepare one for balancers; they also help prepare one for the transverse twist of the spine needed in the seated twists.
- While standing poses may precede or follow other poses, keeping the standing poses at the end will help ground one. They also act as great counter-poses to the head-down inversions. If, however, one wishes to pep up the class, dynamic standing poses can be placed at the beginning.
- The camel pose is usually followed by the child pose or the hare pose (shashankasana).
- The sphinx pose or the crocodile pose is a great precursor to the cobra pose.
- Seated simple twists or standing-twists in the beginning of the flow will prepare one for the more intense classical seated twists.
- Moreover, seated twists and side-twists should flow after the spine has been stretched in the forward or backward bending poses, so they can help align the spine back on either side. Sometimes the nerves in one's weaker side may create a cramping pain; this can be released only through such twists.
- Sometimes forward-bending poses which are intense may need preparatory poses to soften the hips, the back of the legs and the entire back. Lying side-twists, seated hip rolls, the butterfly (titalisana), and even simple leg raises help here.

- Single leg raises (with the neck raised) may prepare one for the headstand and shoulder-stand. It also prepares one for the extreme stretch needed in the plough or the Hanuman pose. In fact, as you increase the duration of the headstand or attempt its variations, equal attention must be invested in leg raises to strengthen the neck for the intensity required. When held for a short duration, leg raises are easy, but when you increase duration in the leg raises, they become advanced poses that introduce you to the idea of true meditation.
- The inverted V, dolphin, full standing stretch in all its variations and most intense forward-bends prepare the head for the pressure, including the blood flow that accompanies the headstand.
- The pelvic tilt, also called kandharasana or shoulder-pose prepares one for the shoulder-stand and the wheel pose.
- The inverted psychic union pose, similar to the shoulder-stand but with the legs hanging low without too much strain at the neck, is a good preparatory pose for the classical shoulder-stand.
- The swan pose (hamsasana) is a great preparatory pose for the intensity of the peacock pose.
- The palm-tree pose on the toes helps with the lotus pose, and may be continually practised to ease oneself eventually into any of the seated meditative poses, including the thunderbolt pose.
- Wrist-strengthening poses like the wheel and the plank help with arm balancers.

CHAPTER 4:
TIME MANAGEMENT

If time is not managed well, whether it is in a class or for personal practice, you will end up feeling dissatisfied. If you are an instructor, you may be assured that your students will feel similarly. After all, the students, some of whom can well practise on their own, are paying to have you organise their session for them. So the management of time while positioning poses, rest breaks, and their respective duration, will all add to a sense of completion and deep satisfaction.

For a teacher, the advanced level class is, interestingly enough, always easier to handle in terms of structuring and time management, because she can urge students to hold a pose for a certain length of time, certain that they will be able to pull it off. This aspect cannot be taken for granted in classes for beginners, because they will not have the stamina for long holds. Depending on the season, weather and the time of the day, they will resist repetition unless they are energetic. And their energy levels fluctuate. An advanced student likes the challenge of being able to push herself on the mat; beginners on the other hand, because they haven't worked on their mental stamina, will often resist requests or resent it when pushed. As a teacher therefore, particularly while training beginners, one must be prepared for all eventualities.

TIME MANAGEMENT IN CLASSES

- When is the best time to practise? In classical yoga, 4 am to 6 am is called the Brahmamuhurta (the time of the divine) and is regarded as the ideal time for practice. Even science establishes that this may indeed be a suitable time. According to research done in the fields of chromatherapy and biological clocks, it has been found that the ACTH levels (a stimulating hormone released in the muscles) begin to decrease and the cortisol or stress hormone levels rise around about this time. The body is clearly giving a wake-up call. However, the truth is that in today's day and age, 4 am to 6 am may be regarded as unrealistic. In such cases, the mornings in general up to 10 am may be recommended. Then later, the evenings, from four pm to six pm, when the biological rhythms again shift, may be exploited for a great and satisfying yoga session. Late in the evening is not an ideal time for yoga since it will disrupt sleep patterns.
- As a teacher, you can make advanced students hold poses for a long duration. Or opt for a basic pose and its advanced variation, as you work the class up a sequence. In an hour long class, you can position 10 to 12 poses comfortably with a hold of one to two minutes in each pose. Though for many practitioners, including advanced ones, it is more tempting to hold the headstand and the crow pose for a long span of time, it is best to organise the class so that all poses are held for an equal duration. If the headstand is held for five minutes or more, even those who are flexible may suddenly feel uncomfortable or stiff while doing the simple seated forward-bend. This is because the headstand contracts the spine. Holding it for a long duration compromises the forward-bend. Also, each pose has an impact on one's nervous system and personality. In classical yoga, it is believed that some poses make the ego swell; while this is good since it makes students push themselves, it should not become the guiding principle on the mat. You do not want to be an adrenaline-driven yoga practitioner! The shoulder-stand should be held for the same length of time

as the headstand, to cool students down, and to defuse the negative fallouts of the ego boosts. These rules may be followed for a personal practice too. One will leave the mat feeling at ease and in a state of harmony with the rest of the world.

- Some poses are easier to hold than others. Even those who hold the headstand with ease may flounder with long duration backbends or standing balancers. In such cases, it is best to split up the class so that there are several different backbends that together add up to the same length as the inversion. The reason guiding this choice is this – where there are difficulties with certain types of poses, it is best to have a cluster of them together so the effect on that body part is strong. Plus, each set is followed by a counter-pose to relieve muscular stress.
- For poses held for a long duration, one needs a long rest break, ideally half a minute to a minute long. Often, it is easy for an experienced teacher to arrive at the length of a rest break after a particular pose. For advanced students, the break would be short, since they revive quickly after a strenuous pose. For beginners, the break would obviously be of a longer duration, even if they have held the pose for a comparatively shorter period. An ideal way to calculate the length of a rest pose is by watching the movement of the chest (when supine) or the back (when prone) as students take a break between poses. If the movement of the breath appears fast then it is best to wait for it to settle down to a normal tempo.
- Pranayama can also be intensified with retention extended to a minute. Usually, advanced practitioners used to the classical and pure forms of yoga will enjoy pranayama, whereas several beginners confess to resisting it simply because it is difficult for them or they get bored. Other beginners may not believe that these practices have a positive physiological impact and some may imagine that pranayama is a psychic form of yoga, far removed from their core belief system. As a result, teachers get demotivated,

and either do not teach pranayama or try killing boredom by doing something disastrous – trying new forms of breathing every few weeks. Worse, they simplify classical steps or modify them. All of this is counterproductive. It is best to hold on to a few basic practices for several years and maintain the classical ratio of inhalation, retention, exhalation in each. Pranayama should be one-fifth of one's yoga practice. Also, students must be reminded that pranayama is a scientifically engineered practice which has a positive impact on the body.

- As for the rest of the practice, for both advanced students and beginners, one-fifth of the time may be split between a start-up prayer and a final one. Many schools avoid this for fear of rustling up religious resistance. In such cases, even where there is no prayer at the start or the end of a class, it is best to have some sort of formal start-up and finale. This could involve a few minutes of silent meditation, either while seated or lying down. This adds to a sense of structure and completeness. Also, it helps the blood clear its lactate levels. (Lactic acid builds up in the blood after any strenuous activity, and triggers the body into the emergency mode. This causes a rise in adrenal or high stress hormones, which goes against the most basic tenet of yoga – that it must be tension-free.)
- Ideally, the final meditation should take one-fifth of the entire class time. Even though initially some students will say that they have to leave early or miss it, it is important to urge them to stay back. The final meditation, in essence, mirrors the benefits of the start-up and final prayer.

TIME MANAGEMENT FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Ideally, finish your practice in the earlier part of the day. This reduces the chance of you skipping a session, either out of lethargy or because of a sudden commitment or fatigue! Also, in the mornings the body is stiff, so the muscular challenge is more intense and the impact on toning and

strengthening is far greater. In the evening, on the other hand, the muscles are already warmed-up, and so the impact is not as noteworthy. Thus, while a morning session is tougher than an evening one, it is also more beneficial.

- Remember to time your sessions around your meals; there has to be a two-hour gap between practice and a meal, if it is light. And a gap of four hours after a heavy meal.
- It is best to stick to a set of basic classical poses as a matter of daily practice.
- This set should include warm-up sequences (ideally the sun salutation or energy releasing series for those who are weak, recovering or suffering from a major ailment), asanas, pranayama and a short final relaxation pose.
- The asana set should include poses from inversions (such as the shoulder-stand or headstand), counter-poses (such as the fish pose or the wheel), forward-bends (such as the seated forward-bend or the child pose), backbends (such as the bow pose), twists (such as the half spinal twist), arm balancers (such as the crow pose) and standing poses (which could be twists, lunges, balancers, or forward/backward bends).
- The choice of asana should depend on the weak spots you wish to strengthen. For example, if you wish to boost your respiratory capacity you may want to focus more on backbends and inversions. If you want to become calm and centred, you may wish to focus on balancers and inversions. However, even while placing an emphasis on certain asanas, do not limit the day's workout to only one part of the body. This could make the overworked part sore the next day, or lead to a lopsided session. The set you opt for must be chosen so it covers the entire body; this will have a direct and positive therapeutic, psychological and spiritual impact.
- Once you have a set of basic, classical poses, you may introduce some stimulating or advanced variations to break the monotony. You will, as you practise, become aware of the similarities between an advanced variation

and a basic one, and on days when you want to challenge yourself, you can play around with advanced variations. In fact, all the variations you learn may be sequenced to follow the basic chart.

- An advanced practitioner needs to focus on holding poses for a longer duration. Plus, she must learn to flow from one pose to another in a controlled, elegant fashion. This makes the session very soothing and meditative. It also makes it challenging.
- Having a core, basic practice of just two or three pranayamas daily is better than experimenting with too many practices. The maturity in pranayama practice does not revolve around the number of practices, but in the consistency of training. The best of the lot are the skull cleansing practice; bellows breathing or bhastrika pranayama; energy channel purifying practice or nadi shodhana; victory breath or ujjayi; humming bee or bhramari; cooling breath or seetali; and hissing breath or seetkari. If you enjoy normal health, opting for the skull cleansing practice and energy channel purifying practice, and winding this down with the humming bee would be fine. If you have certain ailments, the set will have to be formed to address them. This is an area of research and expertise. Some forms of pranayama have contraindications so your choice must be governed by your health.
- The final stage of relaxation is one of the most important components of classical yoga because it allows you to leave the mat in a calm, centred manner. Intriguingly, some studios dispense with this step simply because they do not have the space for the corpse pose! At the very least in your daily practise you need to ensure that you never leave the mat without lying down till your breath is back to normal.
- Ultimately, the simplest and mosi important basic rule to make for oneself is this: Practise regularly. Often, beginners idealistically (and unrealistically) commit to long hours of practice once in a while, instead of daily. A short session daily is better than a long one once a week! The latter creates the perfect condition for injury. Regularity provides the base on which a strong session may be later built.

GLOSSARY OF CHAKRAS AND DOSHAS

Chakras: According to yoga, there are seven chakras or psychic energy centres through which individual awareness passes till it reaches cosmic consciousness. Our body is said to have 72,000 psychic energy channels or nadis that converge along these chakras at the spine. These start from the base, animalistic part of us at the pelvis (dealing with survival and material needs) and rise up to the crown at the top of the head (dealing with the sublime and the expansion of the mind to a space of universal awareness).

Mooladhara chakra: This is the lowest psychic chakra. Moola in Sanskrit means root or source. As the name suggests, it deals with the core of your psychic self.
Location: Base of the spine; related to the adrenal medulla
Governs: Security and survival
Benefits: When in harmony, we feel strong, confident and in control. A well-balanced mooladhara chakra promotes vitality, vigour and growth.
Blockages: When imbalanced, we feel lethargic, demotivated, threatened, anxious, angry, or we become greedy and grasping. We also suffer from problems linked with the earth element, including weight loss or gain, spinal problems and colon issues.

Swadhistana chakra: Swadhistana is Sanskrit is translated as one's own abode. The second primary chakra is two-fingers-width apart from the Mooladhara.
Location: At the tailbone, by the genitals; associated with the urogenital system
Governs: Creative energy and sensuality
Benefits: When in harmony, this chakra opens one to the idea of pleasure, allows for an appreciation of life, boosts creativity and

helps with the finer expression of self. One exudes joyfulness. This chakra also regulates the flow of hormones that impact sensuality, sexuality, creativity, adventure, satisfaction, and an eagerness to learn.
Blockages: When imbalanced, we become frigid, and display little passion. Guilt, selfishness and self-blame become dominant personality traits.

Manipura chakra: Manipura in Sanskrit means city of jewels. This chakra is related to the burden of the ego identity that is said to come from our past lives.
Location: Navel centre; related to the digestive system and adrenal glands
Governs: Ego identity
Benefits: When in harmony the ego is muted, so one learns to share one's work and efforts with others. It heightens will-power, promotes discipline and determination, makes one assertive, and removes a sense of shame. It also eases digestion and boosts the metabolism.
Blockages: When imbalanced, this chakra makes us feel ashamed, frustrated and angry with the world. At the physical level this causes digestive problems.

Anahata chakra: Anahata in Sankrit means unstruck. This chakra helps one develop a stable relationship with self.
Location: Chest; related to the thymus
Governs: Love and self, social acceptance
Benefits: When in harmony, this chakra boosts self-projection, encourages self-love, acceptance and compassion, and promotes generosity towards others and their weaknesses. It helps one release unexpressed sorrows from the past. Since it is associated with the thymus, it helps us build immunity.
Blockages: When imbalanced, this chakra can come in the way of personal happiness, and lead to depression. It induces feelings of animosity, self-pity and indecisiveness. At the physical level, it causes respiratory and circulatory problems.

Vishuddhi chakra: Visha in Sanskrit means impurity, and suddhi means purify. When this chakra is balanced therefore we feel free of mental toxins.
Location: Throat; related to the thyroid
Governs: Self expression
Benefits: When in harmony, we communicate confidently, and develop a clear voice. We also have balanced and calm thoughts, peace of mind, and a feeling of happiness. This chakra purifies the heart centre.
Blockages: When imbalanced, we feel threatened, anxious, angry, or become greedy and grasping. We also suffer from problems linked with the earth element, including weight loss or gain, throat or spinal problems and colon issues.

Ajna chakra: Ajna chakra is also referred to as the third-eye or the guru chakra.
Location: Directly behind the eyebrow centre; related to the pineal gland
Governs: Intellect. At the physical level, it deals with sight.
Benefits: When in harmony, it increases psychic powers, builds intuition and refines awareness and clarity of thought.
Blockages: When out of sync, it causes delusional thinking. We could also suffer from migraine, insomnia, high blood pressure or low immunity.

Sahasrara chakra: This is also known as the crown chakra.
Location: Top of the head; related to the pituitary gland
Governs: Spiritual awareness
Benefits: When in harmony, this chakra invites joy, encourages vairagya or dispassion (a yogic quality that helps us step back from ourselves and negativity) and heightens spiritual awareness and cosmic awareness. It also boosts hormones that aid learning. It impacts the nervous system.
Blockages: When imbalanced, we feel suffer from nervous system woes including clinical depression and paranoia. We also develop addictions and destructive personal attachments.

Doshas: According to Ayurveda, there are three doshas that define bodily humours that make up one's constitution.

Vata dosha: The hyperactive and anxious vata is aligned with the Ayurvedic 'air personality'. Vata controls functions such as respiration, circulation and elimination. Those with balanced vata are alert, quick to act with confidence, and show excellent imagination. Those with imbalanced vata are low in energy, are insecure or anxious, and suffer from problems related to digestion. Because of the potential for burn-out due to high energy expenditure, an imbalanced vata dosha is the most common cause for disease.

Pitta dosha: The fiery and competitive pitta is aligned with the Ayurvedic 'fire personality'. Pitta is married to functions such as absorption, assimilation and perception. Those with balanced pitta are ambitious, display leadership skills and have excellent memories. Those with imbalanced pitta are pushy, prejudiced and prone to anger and impatience; they also suffer from insomnia, weakness and inflammatory conditions.

Kapha dosha: The slow-moving and calm kapha is aligned with the Ayurvedic 'earth personality'. Kapha encompasses all our cells, tissues and organs. Those with balanced kapha have calm and steady minds and strong constitutions. Those with imbalanced kapha suffer from greed, laziness and possessiveness, and display weight gain.

Prakash

Yoga for You does not offer pat instructions; rather, it is an intuitive guidebook drawing from several years of teaching experience. It is a form of sharing.

Yoga for You is a book for everyone committed to yoga – from students to teachers. It provides tips to instructors, counsel to serious practitioners, and a unique perspective to those who self-train.

Covering a range of classical, intermediary and rest poses – from the ever-challenging sirsasana (headstand) to the supremely calming balasana (child pose) – this book places an emphasis on rectifying poor technique. The detailed lists of fine corrections, the cues on how best to progress, and the photographs to illustrate these points, make this book an invaluable guide.

Equally, *Yoga for You* sheds light on the tricks that can make a yoga class or a self-training session more efficient, with instructions on time management, asana sequencing and the best structure for practice sessions. Most of all, the keen insights offered by Prahlada Reddy, the head of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center in Toronto, and Shameem Akthar, an acclaimed yoga instructor, makes this book a must for all yoga buffs.

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